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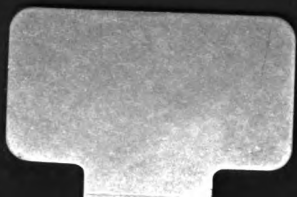
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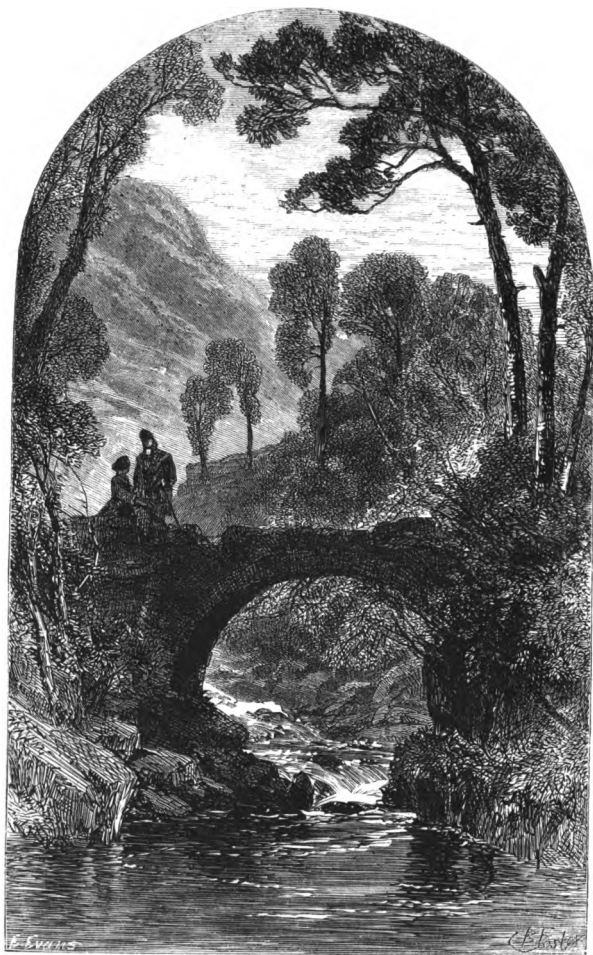
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JESSIE CAMERON

A Highland Story

CHAPTER I.

THERE is not a bonnier glen in Scotland than Glen Rhynie, though few tourists discover it. Leading into the wide and cultivated strath at the foot of the Monadh Liadh mountains, the dashing and impetuous stream of Rhynie can boast of as wild woods along its margin, and of as snug homesteads in the wider part of the valley, where the farm-lands lie sheltered and sunny, as any glen in Inverness-shire.

Few glens could show a nicer or more cosy-

looking cottage than Mrs Cameron's, or, in Highland phrase, Widow Cameron's, of Kin-Rhynie.

The cottage stood at the edge of a birch wood, commanding an extensive view down the valley into the strath beyond. It looked over corn-land and fields, from which, here and there, a thin column of blue smoke arose, showing where a bothy stood ; and from the widow's house one caught a look of Farmer M'Pherson's well-filled stack-yard and tidy farm-steading in the distance. A road wound through the glen by Rhynie side, till it was lost in thick fir-woods far down the strath.

Kin-Rhynie Brae rose sheltering behind the cottage, the white-washed walls of which could vie with any part of the Laird's garden, in the luxuriant clusters of honeysuckle and climbing roses which covered them, and wreathed round the small windows. The cottage consisted of a kitchen (entered by a covered-in porch), with the universal wooden settle close to the wide chimney, and a deal dresser ornamented with an endless variety of bowls, plates, and gaily-flowered crockery, and showing

underneath a goodly collection of black pots, kettles, bright tin pails, and cans of all sizes. A wooden bed with doors, an adjoining cupboard, and a mighty "kist," constituted the principal furniture of the room.

Beyond the kitchen there was a small chamber where the widow and her daughter Jessie slept ; and a loft above, sacred to stores of wool, and odds and ends of all sorts, which also contained the bed, wardrobe, and worldly goods of Donald Cameron, the widow's second son and youngest child. Johnnie, the eldest, worked at his trade of mason ; Jessie looked after the house, the kailyard, and the cows, blithe and busy as a bee from day dawn to gloaming. But Jessie is my heroine, and shall have a word to herself.

Honest, true-hearted Jessie ! how well the sweet Scotch word "leal" describes her disposition ! and how the widow would bless the Almighty for the gift of so good and helpful a bairn ! How her brother Johnnie loved her, and the wild callant Donald too, who cared more for a

grave look from Jessie than for all the parental scoldings which his frequent misdemeanours called down upon him !

The widow had given her children the best education her means and the place afforded ; the parish schoolmaster had duly taught them to read, write, and understand arithmetic, for all of which Johnnie showed as excellent a disposition as Donald did the reverse ; and many a half-hour's weary toil had the latter cost Jessie, trying to get him to his books, when with heart and soul he was longing to finish tying the flies which were to catch the largest trout in Rhynie !

When spinning, knitting, and sewing were added, I believe Jessie's education was complete. But who taught her the innumerable ballads and songs which she used to sing over her work, either in the homely broad Scottish dialect or the more poetic Gaelic ? This I am unable to inform you ; I conclude they came, like the reel steps and flings, which made Jessie the best dancer of Glen Rhynie, by intuition.

Mrs Cameron had lost her husband, after a lingering illness, when Jessie was about thirteen years old. He had conducted the business of a large saw-mill in the strath for many years, and had put up the cottage for his young wife soon after their marriage, renting a couple of small fields adjoining.

Hard work and saving in early life had enabled him to leave enough for the widow to keep her home and bring up her family in comfort ; and now, at twenty years of age, Jessie was everything to her mother, whose health did not allow her to work much out of doors.

The house had been all swept and tidied for the night, and the widow was seated by the peat fire knitting, occasionally lifting the wooden cover of a black pot, which swung from a crook in the chimney, to see if the potatoes were getting ready for supper. She was the very picture of a Highland gudewife ; with her neat thick cap, and its broad black ribbon round the head, which most Highland widows wear all their life. Wonderful were the plaits and crimpings of those caps ! and

great was Jessie's pride in their manufacture. A small tartan handkerchief was pinned across her black gown, and a large blue apron, with a bunch of feathers stuck in the string at the waist, served to keep her knitting-wires in position. Such was the dress of the widow as she sat silently knitting, and her mild face brightened as she heard a high clear voice singing in Gaelic, and saw her daughter come past the window with her milk-pail, just filled, from the byre, where she had been settling for the night her two pets, Crummie and Bess.

Placing the milk in the cool milk-house out by the porch, and washing the pail, whilst the last notes of "Colla ma Rân" died softly away, Jessie entered the cottage, a flood of light from the setting sun pouring through the open door, and making the motes dance before the widow's eyes.

Jessie was very pleasant for any eyes to look at, even though less partial than those which now greeted her.

Rather tall, straight as a wand, and the very pic-

ture of health, it did not occur to you that her waist was not particularly slim, nor her features regular ; and her large dark-grey eyes and long black eyelashes made you forget that her nose was not faultless, and that her mouth was a trifle wide. She had an honest frank smile, and such white teeth that you would remark and remember her face among twenty more beautiful ; and she twisted up her thick glossy black hair so simply and tidily, that it was evident comfort and neatness were more in her thoughts than anything else.

She came in from her day's work as bright and fresh as a mountain daisy, and seated herself on a low stool by her mother's side, with a kiss and a hearty exclamation of pleasure at the time for rest and a bit talk with her dear mammie being come.

" I'm just no sorry the hay's dune. We've a real gude crop the year ; and we'll hae enough for our-sells, and a bit to sell forby, mammie. I've just made up the last into cocks, and it's real fine. I see they're a' busy down the strath wi't too ; and this is bonnie weather for't."

"Ye'll be tired, my lassie, and wanting your meat ; but yon laddie Donald's no come hame yet, and we maun e'en wait for him. He's often late noo," said the widow, sighing.

"The wark's heavy doun at the farm e'en now, mither ; and Mr M'Pherson keeps the lads aye till't," replied Jessie hastily ; and, suddenly changing the subject, added, "Any how, we'll soon be getting our Johnnie back again. He said the brigg would be dune, and he'd come ower the hill the first of summer, and now the harvest will soon be for shearing."

"Fair fa' his foot, be it on hill or dale, and gude guide our lad hame to us," said the widow ; and well she might be anxious for her good son's return, for Donald's ways were causing both her and Jessie more anxiety than they chose to confess. In the present instance they had their supper, and were thinking he must be kept all night at his master's, when the delinquent himself softly lifted the latch and came in, really ashamed of himself, but trying to carry it off

with a bold whistle and careless air, as he flung down his bonnet and saluted his mother with—

“How’s a’ wi’ ye the nicht, mither? it’s geyan late for ye to be oot o’ yer bed, I’m thinking. Are ye an’ Jess getting a crack ower the fire o’ auld days and auld-warld tales?”

“Deed no, Donald,” said the widow; “but we were waiting you, before we would gae to our beds; for Jessie couldna sit up her lane a’ nicht to see wad ye come hame or no, and we were even now going to steek the door and be awa. My laddie, what ever was keeping you sae lang? Was the grieve giein’ extra wark?”

“The wark was ower lang syne,” answered the young man, “but I was awa to the village to take doun a message for the master, and so I just met ithers lads, and the nicht got further spent than I thocht.”

“Then ye’ll be able to tell us if Maggie M’Intyre is really gaun awa or no?” eagerly asked Jessie.

“Ay, Maggie and Jamie, and the twa Robertsons, an’ auld Gow an’ his wife, and ithers, are a’ to be

off in a fortnicht for Australia : and what's mair, Maggie an' Hugh Robertson hae made a match o't at last, an' they're to be married on Monday. Ye'll be bidden to the wedding for sure, Jess, an' we're to dance at the Boat-house. Ay ! it 'ill be a hearty nicht, nae doubt. Peter Campbell was saying it wad be real grand."

"Then, Donald," said his mother, "you've been again wi' Peter and thae ne'er-doweel Campbell lads, and it's no weel dune o' you ; for ye ken how earnestly I have bidden and prayed ye to keep oot o' their way. What gude did ye ever get frae them ? Nocht but bad company and whisky-drinking, and waur, for a' I can learn."

"Houts, nonsense, it's just idle havers ; the laird doesna fancy the Campbells an' Inneses because they live doun rather close to his forest ; but what harm can I get frae them ?" Donald's colour rose, and he continued, excitedly, "Ye forget I'm ower eighteen year. Mither, ye wad hae me a bairn again, playing mysell oot on the green wi' Jessie's lambs, an' gettin' stung because I meddled wi' the

bees. Mair hurt I got frae them than e'er I got frae Peter Campbell's company."

"Oh Donald, Donald," said Jessie, "dinna be angered. Mither's richt, and ye're wrang. If ye could hae heard Mr Laurie speakin' o' thae lads an' their ill ways, ye wadna wish to be thocht ane o' their party."

"Mr Laurie is an ill-grained dour fellow ; an' because he's our Laird's keeper, he doesna fancy lads like them, that are fond o' the river an' the hill ; but that's the way wi' you women, aye girning an' grinding at a body——no, I'm for nane ;" this last remark being in answer to the offer of a jug of milk and a basket of oatcakes which Jessie brought from the cupboard. So, lighting a small lanthorn, Master Donald mounted into his loft in high dudgeon, leaving the two women to proceed to bed in no very pleasant frame of mind.

Donald Cameron was not a bad young man ; his heart was good, and his affection for his mother and family was warm ; but, perhaps owing to his being the youngest, and not so strong a child as the other

two, he had been indulged in childhood ; and now, at eighteen, had a fiery temper, which often overpowered his better feelings and judgment.

Rash, generous, and headstrong, he would risk anything to serve a friend. Scrapes and hairbreadth escapes were his delight. Soon roused to anger by anything like a real or fancied injustice, he was a zealous partisan of all whom he imagined to be under a cloud ; and he seemed to the Campbells, of whom the widow had spoken, the very person to suit their purposes.

Dunerdie, "the village," which was indeed the only thing deserving that name within twenty miles, was some distance below Glen Rhynie, nearer to the banks of the larger river into which the Rhynie and many other mountain-torrents ran. Farms, bothies, and small crofts lay around ; whilst the mountains and woods, which stretched upwards from the valley, were principally sacred to the carefully-preserved game of all kinds which abounded in their recesses, and included the Laird's deer-forest, which extended over many a mile of mountain and

heather. The so-called "Great House" of Dunerdie stood pleasantly on the hill-side, overlooking the village and strath beyond.

The Laird was an excellent master and kind landlord, and both he and his wife had a sincere love for the place, where they invariably passed the summer and autumnal months.

Dunerdie and the surrounding hamlets, or rather I should call them scattered bothies, contained several whisky-shops, a general dealer's establishment (where all things might be purchased, from ploughshares to cap-trimmings), and such necessary concerns as the post-office, and carrier's house surrounded by cart-sheds. There were, of course, plenty of inhabitants of the village whose characters were none of the best ; and whilst among the youth of the parish the Campbells and Inneses bore the reputation of the best shots, heartiest boon-companions, and merriest fellows, the elders, with more truth, added to this that they poached, drank, were of idle and dissipated habits ; and hinted that wild doings went on in their cottages on the Black Muir

For some time past these young men had paid great court to Donald Cameron, whose frank and daring character easily led him to listen to their tales of sport and successful expeditions on the hill, partly from a genuine love of adventure, and partly because they flattered him as to his correct eye and intimate knowledge of the hills and glens.

Soon discovering his weak points, they always took care to allude to the strict order in which his mother kept him, and they would affect the greatest reluctance at allowing him to go to their houses, or participate in any frolic, "for fear o' angering the auld wife for her daunted bairn."

Donald had been considerably staggered in his allegiance to Peter Campbell by discovering the extent of his poaching; which was a heinous sin in the eyes of all at Kin-Rhynie, where the Laird's game and the Laird's orders were sacred things.

But after a due amount of bad arguments from the Campbells, and specious reasonings from the Inneses, he began to argue loudly that the poor folk had a better right to the game on the wild hills

than the rich ; and in short, our friend Donald at this time stood a fair chance of turning out remarkably ill. Had the widow known all this, she would have spent many a wretched hour ; as it was, both she and her daughter were uncomfortable on the subject, but trusted in Donald's present wild disposition soon giving place to a more steady and purpose-like character, which they fondly hoped he would acquire with years.

CHAPTER II.

ON the morning after we introduced these good folks to our readers, Donald, having slept off his bad humour, was in the wildest spirits, laughing at his mother's words of advice ; teasing his sister about her admirers and sweethearts, of whom he declared there were enough to make a troop ; and finally causing Jessie very decidedly to colour and look surprised, by announcing that he had heard for certain that Allister Stuart would be back in Dunerdie within a very few days. After this bit of news, and a wicked nudge of his elbow to show his mother Jessie's rosy cheeks, he went off to his work, and the women busied themselves as usual the live-long day, till the sunset brought them once more a cessation of labour.

Maggie M'Intyre duly called at Kin-Rhynie to announce her marriage with a blush and smile, and to invite the Camerons to the wedding festivities. These were to take place at the end of the fortnight which (as Donald had mentioned) yet remained previous to her final departure for Australia, with about a dozen or so of other emigrants from the environs of Dunerdie.

Jessie promised her assistance in manufacturing some of the wedding paraphernalia ; so, after a consultation on the important subject of the bridal costume, Maggie took her leave with the proud addition to her invitation, "that it was to be a free marriage, and naebody wad hae to pay," which is considered a far more creditable proceeding among the Highlanders than the old-fashioned "penny" weddings, where each invited guest is expected to contribute a small sum towards the expenses of the day ; and which, though frequently leaving a surplus for the young couple to begin the world with, often caused scenes of riot and disorder.

My heroine's life of cheerful activity and kind-

ness had little variety, save in the difference which the changing seasons brought in her outdoor work ; and she thought of her coming gaiety with great pleasure, heightened, perhaps, by the love which all women have for weddings. She sat up later and rose earlier to finish some of Maggie's gowns ; and on the Tuesday preceding the all-important Thursday, she set off with her handiworks to Dunerdie, to deliver them to the bride, and to see and hear of all the preparations for the wedding.

Maggie's parents were cotters ; but the rich blacksmith of Dunerdie was her father's brother, and both he and his fat jolly wife were determined to give this feast a sort of double *éclat*, by combining a farewell merrymaking to the "outward bound" party, with all the fun which belonged, as of right, to the wedding itself. As Maggie's father had already, in preparation for his departure, "rouped," or, in English, sold his goods and chattels by auction, the whole family of M'Intyres were established at the comfortable roomy house close to the smithy with their relations.

Jessie heard sounds of unusual scrubbings and polishing of tables and chairs as she entered ; and was greeted by Mrs M'Intyre herself—a red-haired merry-looking dame, who looked up from an enormous box of table-cloths which she was sorting out—with a “Is that you, Jess Cameron? Maggie will be real happy to see ye ; but the house is sae throughither (*Anglice*, untidy), you'll no find a chair to sit down on. Maggie, lass, where are ye hidin' ?” screamed she, vigorously ; continuing—“As to Jamie and her mither, they're sae taen up wi' their kists, and their claes, and their gangin' awa, they're nae help ava! I'm maist beside my judgment wi' what there's to do. There's cakes to bake, an' butter to kirn, an' the house sae awfu' thrang as it is!—but my gudeman is no ane to stint folk ; an' when we gie our niece her marriage-party, it's nae wonder if there's wark.”

Jessie professed her wish to assist in any way, but was pounced upon by Maggie, who carried her off to the garret to see “the gran' cap an' gown that she had gotten frae Perth itsell,” and in which

she was to outshine all Dunerdie brides, past, present, and future.

The busy gudewife, however, insisted on the lassie's coming down to take a share in the housewifely and hospitable preparations ; and Jessie stood a chance of being fairly bewildered by the variety of occupations offered her. She helped with a willing spirit ; and having heard enough to convince her of the probable grandeur of the wedding in the eyes of the M'Intyre family, she was not altogether sorry to find evening approaching, and to be obliged to take leave of the busy party, and wend her way towards Glen Rhynie. Jessie had no poetic musings, nor romantic ideas of sunset reveries and moonlit rambles ; but she loved to see the sun sink down beyond the western mountains, to catch the rosy flush as it passed over the high tops, and to watch them gradually acquire the deep purple tint of the gloaming hour. She loved to listen to the gentle sough of the breeze in the fir-trees, and to see the bright dancing Rhynie brawl and leap over the rocks. This was as lovely a September evening

as ever shone: the midges danced through the air, or hung in clouds over the streams—fish leaped after them, and made rings in the clear water of the stiller pools—the golden light lingered on brae and tree. Jessie stood enjoying the bonnie evening before she left the road for the smaller and less frequented track up Rhynie's side. She sat down on a small bridge, and in her own fashion was communing with herself on the sweet and peaceful scenes round her, when her attention was attracted by seeing Donald pass below, in company with Peter Campbell and young Innes, striking off the high-road in the direction of the Black Muir; and she sighed deeply at this fresh proof of her wayward brother's disregard of all his good mother's fond entreaties and admonitions. So intently did Jessie follow the receding trio with her eyes, and so eagerly did she listen to Donald's merry bold laugh till it died away in the distance, that she did not heed the approach of a stranger from the glen path itself; and she started from her seat when a friendly voice greeted her with "Little did

I expect to find blithe Jessie Cameron a' her lane, watchin' the trouties loupin', with ne'er a word for an auld friend, to bid him welcome back to Dunerdie."

The speaker eagerly shook the lassie's hand, and certainly had no cause of complaint as to the warmth of his reception, for Jessie answered with scarlet cheeks and flashing eyes, and the most genuine pleasure which voice or manner could express. "'Deed then, Allister Stuart, an' ye startled me finely! How was I to ken ye were in Dunerdie ava? Your brother told us ye were likely to bide in Ross-shire till harvest, and doun the glen ye come like a bogle! But I'm real glad to see ye, whatever," added Jessie, with another shake of the hand, and a half-shy, half-playful manner.

Whilst she and Allister mutually satisfy inquiries for friends, and chat together comfortably on the bridge, I will tell you who Allister was. The Laird of Dunerdie had a very large home-farm, and his right-hand man, and chief adviser as to its management, was his bailiff (or grieve) Stuart. Allister

was the grieve's younger brother ; indeed, they might have passed for father and son, so great was the difference of their ages. Having successively lost many brothers and sisters, the grieve had reared his youngest brother with the utmost care and affection, and he also was a favourite with the Laird. Brought up as a farmer, he was an active and intelligent assistant to the grieve ; and in his late absence, which had been of some months' duration, had been studying the system pursued on a Ross-shire farm lately reclaimed from the stony moorland, and making himself thoroughly conversant with the different steps taken in managing it ; the Laird wishing to try the same plan on a rough tract of land near Dunerdie.

Allister and Jessie were old friends, for he had come to the country with his brother at an early age ; and since both had grown up, (though they met less frequently than in the days of school and childhood) had always been great cronies. During the last year their feelings had taken, unconsciously perhaps, rather a more tender turn ; and if the good-

looking Allister Stuart was always ready to walk homewards from kirk carrying the widow Cameron's big bible and unwieldy umbrella, perhaps the bright eyes and merry tones of her daughter had something to do with the attention.

They were not fairly and avowedly in love. Jessie was teased about Allister by Donald, and he certainly cared more about seeing her than any other lass in the strath ; but not a word had been spoken on the subject of affection, and she scarcely knew why a sight of him, or a word from his lips, made her feel gay and heartsome for the whole day. In his position as grieve's assistant, and as being constantly in the Laird's employ, the young man was thought well off in Dunerdie, and a better match than Jessie ; for, though the widow was in comfortable circumstances, she held no farm, and the two crofts of Kin-Rhynie were none of the best or largest. Allister was extremely good-looking, having handsome features, a well-made and active though not tall figure, with an air of superiority in his whole person and manners, probably the result of his

constant intercourse with his master, and others of a superior station in life.

We have left him and Jessie sitting on the bridge quite long enough ; as the twilight deepened, she rose, and declared that “ she should hae been hame lang syne, and her mither wad be wonderin’.”

“ No, she’ll likely guess what’s kept you,” said Allister, “ for I had just been seeing her when I met you ; and indeed it was she that told me where I would find you. Little enough time you give me, Jessie, when I have so much to ask you. But you *are* really a wee bittie glad to see me again,” said Allister ; “ I wad fain hear it frae yoursell.”

“ What gude o’ my tellin’ you what you ken weel enouch afore,” said Jessie, frankly. “ Ye ken how blithe I am to see ye ; and mony’s the time I’ve missed you while you’ve been awa, and wondered wad ye ever be hame again.”

“ I daresay you thought I should forget you and bonnie Glen Rhyne altogether, among the gay lads and lassies and the grand farms of Ross-shire.”

“ No, Allister, I did ye nae sic an ill turn as that,”

answered Jessie, raising her speaking eyes, "I ken fu' weel ye hae ower gude a heart to forget your hame and your friends, whatever ye micht see when awa. Ane's ain countrie, and ane's ain hearth-stane, is aye the bonniest place, ye ken, Allister."

And so it was to Jessie, whose honest heart had no idea of change being possible. Whatever Allister might have thought on this subject, one thing was clear, he found Jessie Cameron's company very agreeable, for he escorted her till within sight of her own home, through whose window the fire-light glistened, telling of evening. They said good-night—it took a long time to say ; and after that, Jessie turned again to look at Allister in the dim light, till the turn in the glen path hid him from her gaze.

Very happy and bright looked Jessie, as she hastened into the cottage, and endeavoured to atone for her late arrival by an extra share of activity and bustle over her preparations for supper ; nor did her mother scold, but remarked quietly, "that she wasna expectin' her in a hurry when Allister

"I he Stuart said he wad gang an' meet her." The exuberance of Jessie's spirits broke out in a variety of songs; and the widow could not refrain from a little kind banter, when all the answer she got to a query about the calf being in the byre was, "And isna it fortunate he's just come in time for Maggie's marriage and the ball!"

The widow had seen the growing affection springing up between her daughter and Allister, and fondly pictured to herself a snug home and happy lot for the darling of her heart. The tears came to her eyes as she thought of her own young days, and the dearly-loved choice of her maiden fancy, now laid in Dunerdie kirkyard; but yet the good widow would mentally bless the all-wise Providence which had lightened the one great sorrow of her quiet life, by giving her such comfort in her children. The poor fond mother knew but little of Donald's evil ways.

The next day John Cameron arrived at home, and there was, indeed, joy at Kin-Rhynie.

The widow and Jessie could not do enough, they

thought, to welcome him. His summer's work had been well paid ; he had received both praises and thanks from his employers, and was right happy now in the prospect of remaining at home, and joining in the harvest occupations of his family. John was very like his sister in appearance, and somewhat in disposition, save that he was less gay, more earnest and deep-thinking, and that diffidence of his own merits in every way rendered him far more reserved than the merry Jessie. Few were more devoted in their affection than John and his family, and the widow felt a natural pride in the good name of her son, and the esteem in which he was held by high and low in his own neighbourhood.

You may be sure the family affairs and interests were amply discussed that day, and Donald's wild ways regretted and talked over. John fully intended to speak seriously to him, and try to bring him to reason ; but Donald, just now, was so taken up with the preparations for the marriage, at which he was to appear in the important character of

“best man,” that for the present John saw that all lectures would be totally disregarded.

Donald only came home to fetch his holiday clothes, and could stay but a short while with his family, as the bridegroom had insisted (so he said) on his sleeping at the Robertsons’ house to enter upon his duties, by entertaining the wedding guests early the next day; for a Highland marriage day, on the occasion of a grand wedding, always begins by the bridegroom and bride receiving, at their respective homes, some of their friends to breakfast, as the beginning of the hospitable gathering.

On the way down to the strath, Donald met Peter Campbell bound on one of his poaching expeditions, and the certainty of the keeper having accompanied the Laird to a distant part of the forest, and the circumstance of Donald’s being free from his usual plea of going home betimes, caused Campbell to think this a favourable chance for inveigling the lad farther than he had yet done into his nefarious schemes. With a bad name himself, he detested those who were respected. John

Cameron and he had never been friendly, even in school-days ; and whilst all prospered with the one, the other was never out of trouble. His greatest wish was to inflict some blow upon the pride of the Camerons, and therefore he had taken more than ordinary trouble to corrupt Donald. " Weel, laddie, whaur are ye gaun the nicht?" was his address to the young man : " I hae a chance for ye, the like will ne'er be again ; only," added he tauntingly, " your mammie 'ill be sendin' down the lassie to see you hame by gloamin', I reckon, sae it's useless my tellin't."

" I'll never get ye to understand, Peter, that I'm my ain maister, an' do my ain will ; an' I'm gaun to sleep in the Robertsons' hay-loft the nicht, as ye nicht ken weel, when ye heard him choose me for his best man the ither day. Tell us what is't you're after?" Peter then told him that, if favoured by a clear moonlight, they intended to go through a wood of the Laird's, and hoped for a good bagful. He advised Donald to slip out from Robertson's

about nine o'clock, and join his party in a certain lonely spot, which he indicated.

His taunts, and the golden visions of sport which he held out, overcame all lingering scruples, and finally he triumphed. Donald, well primed by a glass or two of whisky, stole off at the given time, and found the Campbells and Inneses, four in number, besides Tam M'Kay, a poor orphan lad about fifteen, who was a sort of dependant on Peter's bounty. I am not going to describe the measures taken, nor the exact proceedings of the party. Donald had promised to himself not to fire a shot ; but the sight of a fine roebuck (which had been roused by the beating of the cover where he lay) standing for a moment distinctly visible in the clear night overcame his resolutions ; he quickly seized Peter's gun, made a capital shot, and the bonnie roebuck fell. This, together with other game, having been carefully removed down a little glen, where Peter's pony waited to take all by lonely paths to the Black Muir, Peter slapped Donald on

the shoulder, with an emphatic "'Odsake, I'll no ca' ye laddie mair! ye're as gude a man as ony o' us; an' ye're ane o' us now, let yer folk yammer an' girn as they will."

With a farewell congratulation from all, and believing himself verily a hero, Donald went back to his hay-loft, too excited to sleep, and smothering all qualms of conscience as best he might.

CHAPTER III.

BRIGHT shone the sun on Maggie's wedding-morn, and bright were the visions and thoughts of our heroine as she prepared her simple finery for the day. "Allister likes bonnie lasses, he says, to be geyan weel dressed. I wish I had got a silk gown like Maggie's sister ; but for a' that, I daur to say I can dance as licht and be as aften taen up as ony lass in Dunerdie."

So soliloquised she, as she took out the bright pink which was her best gown, and the shoes with silver buckles, which appeared on great occasions. Pretty was the picture of that maiden at her toilet, now and then seeking her mother's assistance, or asking her opinion as to the arrangement of a plait of shining hair : for Jessie had magnificent hair ; and though it looked well in its usual thick coil, it was

far more displayed by the cunning plaits and smooth braids in which she now arranged it. When the gown was on, and John saw his sister come from her room into the kitchen where he waited for her, all in his best, he felt proud of her. So bright-looking a lassie he thought was seldom seen ; and when, to crown the glories of the toilette, a silver brooch, which he had reserved as a surprise, was added to fasten the white collar, the family council agreed “ that Jess looked most uncommon nice.”

The widow never went to merrymakings ; so John, having duly enveloped his sister in his mother’s soft Cameron-tartan plaid, they went down the glen together, prepared to be as gay and happy as possible. That plaid recalled many a bright day, to the widow, of youth and love and lang syne. It usually lived most carefully wrapped up in the great kist, and appeared only on great occasions ; for had it not been her husband’s first gift after their marriage, when he put it round her, and told her, “ Noo she was a *real* Cameron, and should hae as fine a tartan as Locheil’s leddy hersell ” ?

When John and Jessie emerged from Glen Rhynie, they joined many others going towards the smithy, and hearty welcomes from young and old were given to John ; whilst Jessie was soon the centre of a party of merry lads and lasses, whose laughter rang cheerily along as they hastened to the scene of action. Mrs M'Intyre was a happy woman that day ! for her house was full to overflowing ; and as most of the early guests were females (the men having gone to escort the bridegroom from his home), the clatter and buzz on the green before the door, and in every corner inside, were truly marvellous. Jessie was admitted into the back-room, where sat Maggie in her wedding dress, looking very red and flurried, vainly trying to get gloves on her sturdy brown hands. Maids and matrons filled the little room, advising, admiring, criticising, and (not a few) envying the lucky damsel who was going to achieve matrimony under such grand auspices. Meanwhile Mrs M'Intyre and the elders were in the best room, whilst the smith himself watched carefully that each new-comer should get

a glass of cordial or whisky "for luck." Ere long a whisper ran through the room that the bridegroom's party was coming, and the bride got many strict orders to "bide quiet a wee langer"—for of all unlucky omens the worst is, either of the happy couple catching sight of the other before the minister is present.

Most of the girls ran to window and door to see the bridegroom's arrival, which was announced by the approaching sound of the bagpipes and the firing of guns.

The procession consisted of some thirty or forty lads preceded by the piper, after whom came the bridegroom arm-in-arm with the "best maid," one of Maggie's sisters ; Donald Cameron, with the scarlet band of plaited gartering round his arm which marks the "best man," coming next. Our friend Donald was in the highest spirits, for several compliments from Peter Campbell that morning, on his skill the previous night, had quite overpowered his conscience, at all events for the present. The minister having arrived, a space was, with some

difficulty, cleared in the best room, and bride, bridegroom, and their respective attendants, being established in their places, the simple Scotch marriage ceremony was commenced, and in a very few minutes Hugh and Maggie were made one. Forthwith there began such a general scramble and confusion — kissing, hand-shaking, wishing joy, health-drinking, and general chattering and laughing, that some of the elders of both sexes were fain to escape to the green. After a little time the whole company, young and old, were formed in procession two and two, with the wedding-party at the head, and off they marched to the great barn prepared for dancing, where the squeaking of fiddles already summoned them to commence. The first reel, as is always the case at a Highland wedding, was danced only by the bride and bridegroom, the best man and best maid, after which the fun grew general. You may be sure that Jessie and Allister had long before this time found one another, and danced away as if their souls were in it. And if any wish to know at what time this was, I may inform

them that the dancing began about six o'clock in broad daylight, and went on without interruption till Mrs M'Intyre had got ready the different savoury compounds for the meal—a happy union of dinner and supper, which was laid out in another barn not far off.

Meanwhile the older men smoked their pipes about the green, and the matrons gossiped together, discussing country news, and the probable success of the emigrants who were so soon to leave them, whilst the juniors sought out each their favourite lad or lass, and danced or chatted as pleased them best. Jessie was too popular a partner to be allowed to remain long at rest, but nevertheless she found time for a talk with an old friend on the green — a pleasing, sonsy-looking young matron with a baby in her arms, whose greeting showed that she and Jessie were sincerely glad to meet.

“Eh, then, Katie Cumming, is this you? It's really terrible, I never get a sight o' you noo,” said Jessie, whilst she admired the baby.

"Sure eneuch," answered Mrs Cumming, "it's mysell, lass; and gin we seldom meet, the mair shame to you, for when a's dune an' said, our farm's but ten mile ower the hill, and a fine walk in summer-time, and you're never our gate ava. Johnnie maun bring you ower afore winter, for the hill's a wild place in coorse weather."

"And sae you've brocht your young son ower," remarked Jessie, whilst the infant crowed and laughed in her arms—"a dear bonnie bairn he is!"

"You see I couldna be awa frae him; and, forby the marriage, I was wantin' to speak to my father about Bell's comin' back hame."

"I was just gaun to ask for wee Bell; she'll hae grown a nice lass, I'm thinkin', but ower young to manage your father's muckle farm. What are you gaun to do about the body that's been in charge sin' you married and left hame, Katie?"

"She's just turned so weaklike and ill, my father's to gie her the auld cottage by the farm-side; and as wee Bell has been awa thae twa years and better, and is nae mair used to the farm than a toun lass,

our auntie Eppy is to come and keep the house, and take care o' Bell and a'."

"Your auntie Eppy? oh, that's the ane frae down the countrie—her that Bell was sent down to the saut water wi'."

"Ay, ye're richt; she's a kind gude body, and we're real happy at the thocht o't," said Mrs Cumming; "and as soon as a's settled, they'll be comin' hame, I daur to say, afore the end o' harvest."

"Mr M'Pherson's farm is our nearest neebour after Rhynie cottages," continued Jessie, "and I hope Bell will be as loesome a lassie as you were, Katie. She's no sae muckle younger than me, for she ages wi' our Donald, you ken." The friends' chat was ended here by Allister Stuart asking Jessie to dance again, and Mrs Cumming turned to greet Mr Laurie, the gamekeeper, who had just mingled with the rest, and was an old acquaintance of hers in her girlhood at Dunerdie.

By-and-by the barn was lighted up with tallow candles, which served the purpose quite as well as brilliant chandeliers, and the dancing grew fast and

furious. From big Annie Ross, the baker's wife, who stood five feet eight in her bare feet, to little May, the bride's youngest sister, of eight years old, all were at it, toe and heel, fingers snapping, the lads jumping and louping, the elders looking on, giving inspiriting cries of "Hech, lads"—"Noo, then, lassies," till the rafters rang again. There was a pause while supper was going on, and then they set to work again, and danced with unflagging spirit. Unfortunately, the night began to be extremely wet, so that many of those who had a distance to go began to pack up and be off in their carts or under thick plaids; and John Cameron took Jessie home—tired, no doubt, but loth to leave the merrymaking, even though the night was on the wane.

The poaching exploits of the previous night, which we have narrated, were kept a profound secret. Mr Laurie had been heard to say at the wedding that his wife had fancied she heard a shot or two in the woods; but he had told her she was a foolish body, and afraid in his absence; and thus the

culprits thought that all was safe. Laurie also had alluded to his being ordered by the Laird to go to Inverness for some days the next afternoon.

Not a word had been lost by Peter Campbell and his friends, who soon had organised a second expedition, for the more daring purpose of securing a red deer, if possible. Donald was included, and promised to find some pretext for absenting himself from Kin-Rhynie all night. Meanwhile the company slowly dispersed, and the barn at length was deserted.

Allister Stuart and John Cameron had had a long talk about Donald, and the former had told John that he intended to interest the Laird in him, and get him some employment which would remove him from his bad companions, and would be gratifying to Donald's vanity at the same time, for the Laird was a great person in Glen Rhynie.

CHAPTER IV.

“ It is a most awfu’ wild day, sir,” said the lassie who brought in breakfast to Mr Wilson, the supervisor of excise in Dunerdie, the second day after the wedding. “ You’ll surely no be gaun amang the hills, with the wind blawin’, and the clouds chasin’ ane anither ower the taps ! It’s liker a December than a September day,” continued the damsel, arranging a substantial meal as she spoke ; “ you’ll be clean blawn awa aff your powny.” Indeed, to look at the dapper little man who sat by the fire, in the chimney-corner, warming his hands at the blaze, you would have agreed with the above young woman ; but if you did, you would have been a poor judge of Mr Wilson the gauger. Keen-sighted and zealous in the discharge of his duties, he kept a pretty sharp look-out as to the illicit trade

in whisky, and immediately around his own district, was as well acquainted with the probable spots for stills, and the suspicious characters who worked them, as e'er a supervisor in the north. His assistant, who usually had the district of Dunerdie under his charge, had been lately completely baffled in the searches which he had made. Yet the mountain dew *was* distilled, and the revenue cheated, somewhere not far off, but so cleverly, that the assistant defied the supervisor himself to find out the delinquents. Mr Wilson had been some short while in Dunerdie, carrying on underhand inquiries about everything and every one likely to lead him aright; and now, he thought, honest man! that he had found a clue, and, having arranged all his plans with his subordinates, was prepared to gain honour and glory as a clever crafty supervisor. Regardless, therefore, of the lassie's dismal forebodings, he mounted his pony, and made for a certain spot on the moor where he had his two assistants waiting for him. And there we will take leave of them for the present,

tying on their caps, and wrapping their plaids securely around them, as a protection against the keen mountain-blasts and scuds of cold driving rain.

Early that same morning, Donald, Peter, and the rest, stole off, long ere daylight, and made their way into the best ground in the Laird's deer-forest. The stormy weather and high wind had, as Peter and Innes correctly calculated, driven some of the stags for shelter to the outskirts of the fir-wood, where, among the corries and recesses of the hill, they found good grass and quiet feeding.

Perfectly acquainted with the habits of deer, Campbell had managed his stalk beautifully; and when, soon after daylight, the herd commenced feeding on towards the concealed poachers, Peter deemed his success a certainty. The hinds and their calves, however, were so long in his way that he only got a shot at the fine stag, which was his object, later in the morning than he had counted on. Severely wounded, the poor animal yet struggled gallantly to escape, and, followed by the party and their sly, crafty-looking dog, half

deer-hound, half collie, he went over some little extent of country, but was finally brought to bay in a deep glen, through which a mountain-burn, swollen to fury by the late heavy rains, dashed along in a brown, angry, and foaming torrent.

No sooner was the stag fairly dead, and laid on the heather, surrounded by his destroyers, than Innes and Peter, having first "gralloched," commenced hiding the carcass with boughs and turfs, leaving it to be cut up and carried away during the night. The whisky-flask went round, and the four poachers were about to make the best of their way home, when through the storm was heard the faint echo of a hound's bay, which, however, was instantly silenced. "See to yoursell, lads," said Peter, listening; "it's hardly possible that we can be followed, but we may as well loup ower the linn as be fund here wi' our guns. Laurie's awa, an' I ken fine that the watcher was on the ither beat this mornin'. Donald, lad, tak you the second gun (mind, for she's loaded), and Tam, gang down a wee, and look gin a's richt."

A few seconds of suspense, and Tam reappeared with an anxious face and signals expressive of danger. "Gude sake," he cried, "rin for yer lives, men; the mist is liftin', an' I see Laurie an' his lads, an' the ither watcher wi' him. The dog, too, is on the vera track o' the stag's feet, an' smellin' at the bluid-drops on the heather!"

One look around and at each other, and the four felt that a prompt resolution was their only salvation. "Ance through yon water an' up the rocks, we'll gie them a turn through the hill."

"We'll meet them, an' see wha's best," said Innes fiercely.

"Na, na," continued Peter, "what winna do by might, do by flight. Gif they dinna see us, they canna swear till's; but the burn is just awfu' deep an' fu' o' holes, an' strong too. It's bigger than Rhynie at the ford, but yet it's our ae chance, I'm thinkin'. Sae in wi' ye, Innes! I'll tak the gun, for I'm strongest." Cautiously, at different places, they stepped down into the sullen flood, and with different success.

The water came up breast-high, and the current ran with fearful velocity. Holding by roots and branches at first, and then steadying themselves as best they might, Campbell and Innes were near the other bank when the hound came in sight, and made straight towards the half-buried stag ; whilst, in one other instant, the men, headed by Laurie, a powerful and resolute-looking man, appeared on the top of the steep glen-side. At first both Peter and Innes thought all was safe, for they well knew that few would risk fording the burn in its present dangerous state, and they crept up through the juniper-bushes, which, being in shadow, afforded them shelter. But a cry from the very bed of the torrent caused the pursuers to hasten down the rocks, and the pursued to think the game was up.

Donald Cameron, like the two first men, had experienced great difficulties in buffeting the waters but his strength and activity had nearly got him through, when he too heard that cry of agony, and, looking round, he saw the lad Tam M'Kay hurried along by the current, and vainly struggling with

the stream. Regardless of personal danger, Donald plunged back into the river, his quick eye having at once seen that a powerful eddy would bring the drowning terrified lad within the grasp of his arm. One hand held the gun with which he was intrusted high out of the water, with the other he caught M'Kay's clothes, and dragged him to the shore, whilst Campbell crept through the bushes, and assisted to pull the half-exhausted creature on land.

Meanwhile Laurie and his party were on the opposite bank, preparing to take the stream, shouting and encouraging one another. They had all paused, seeing the danger and difficulty of the attempt, and one and all watched Donald's gallant exploit with secret admiration. Laurie with violent words urged them on, and they, perhaps willing to give their foes one other chance, again hesitated, when Laurie sprang past them, exclaiming, "Donald Cameron! I'll have you in Inverness jail for this morning's work, you idle ne'erdoweel loon! Fine comfort that will be to your widowed mother, and a good return for your upbringing: when you're

side by side with all the rascals o' the shire, it will break her heart, maist likely." During this speech the irate keeper descended to a rock in the water, and was preparing to ford. Donald had gained the shore, and turning round, mad with passion and excitement, faced his pursuers like a baited bull, and stood there, gun in hand.

Innes and Tam had managed to creep up the hill-side, but Campbell still lay concealed in the junipers, goading on Donald by half-audible exclamations. Donald, in whom rage had conquered all other feeling, shouted to Laurie, "Gif ye ca' me an' mine siclike names, an' if ye come but ae step nearer, as sure as death I'll shoot you as you stand." To which the keeper replied, "Tak your care, my bonnie boy, or it's hangin' you'll be kept for," and stepped into the torrent.

The next instant there was a flash, a sharp crack, and a deep groan, as the shot and slugs, with which the gun was loaded, took effect in Laurie's right arm and shoulder, and he fell into the deep pool near which he stood.

CHAPTER V.

DONALD had scarcely fired the fatal shot ere his better feelings came rushing back, and in his agony of repentance he would gladly have given his life to have recalled the last five minutes. Claspings his hands, he would have flung himself into the stream again, but he was forcibly grasped by Campbell and dragged up the brae.

“Are ye daft, lad?” whispered he: “after sic a shot as yon, you maun seek gude hidin’, an’ keep as quiet as can be, for the haille countrie ’ill be after ye in an hour’s time.”

Ere they had lost sight of the glen, Campbell, in answer to Donald’s frantic entreaties to be told Laurie’s fate, consented to halt an instant, and they saw the keeper, supported by the other men, lying pale and fainting on the bank, but not dead, as the wretched Donald’s fears led him to suppose.

Thanks to the thick mist which hung about the tops, and to their knowledge of the country, the poachers were able to escape all chance of immediate pursuit. Campbell, having desired Innes and M'Kay to get home as best they could, prepared to guide Donald to a place of safety. Miserable indeed was their hurried journey over moor and mountain-top ; nor would Campbell listen to all the self-accusing penitent speeches of his young companion. He spared him no taunt or blame in his power, declaring that he had placed them all in jeopardy by his conduct, and assuring him that, if he were hung, he would have but his own act to blame for it. Poor comfort for Donald ! After several hours of fatiguing and toilsome walking, they began to descend the steep mountain, until they came upon a wild loch surrounded by black rocks and frowning crags, in the very heart of the barren hills. The waters of the little tarn found their way downwards through a narrow savage-looking defile, which appeared as if no human habitation were within many miles of it. Donald knew the glen by

name, and had once been on a fishing excursion to the lake ; he knew that one of the passes out of those mountains led into Athole, and that, by following the burn down towards the woods, they would eventually reach the wide strath. But it was an unfrequented spot, and looked gloomy enough in the misty atmosphere. "Now then," at length said Campbell, "if auld Lachlan the shepherd be willin', we'll hide ye safe enough for a day or twa, but ye'll hae to swear an' keep the secret, for it's no mony folk he wad do as muckle for, beyond mysell."

"Is auld Lachlan's bothy this length awa frae the toun, then?" said Donald.

"Ay is't ; it's the auldest bothy in a' the hills, an' he whiles comes to't to get the sheep down frae the hill aff the summer grazings, an' whiles he's putting them on in spring-time, an' whiles he has ends o' his ain," remarked Campbell. Soon the bothy was discernible—a heap of turf apparently on the steep side of a rocky piece of hill. The approach to it was by a narrow ledge overhanging the almost

precipitous bed of the stream, and the rocks which seemed to support the sides of it were craggy and broken. A thread of water trickled slowly down their rough sides, and had worn for itself a tiny channel in the stone. On a near approach, a rude dyke was visible surrounding a sheepfold, but all seemed deserted. The bothy was built of peats and stones, with a turfed roof, in which there was a hole that served as a chimney ; a small stack of peat mingled with bog fir filled up the space at one end between it and the hill-side. Peter knocked at the solid wooden door for some minutes unheeded, but at length the old shepherd peered cautiously out, and, recognising Campbell at once, greeted the two companions, whose tale was listened to with sundry startling guttural ejaculations and comments in Gaelic. "So, lad, you're wantin' hidin'," said old Lachlan to Donald ; "come awa in, an' you're kindly welcome ; that is, gin you'll swear no to tell what ye may see an' hear in this bothy to ony leevin' soul ? "

Donald readily complied with this condition,

upon which the old man ushered them into the sole apartment of the bothy, a low dark room, with rafters and beams enamelled black with peat smoke. It was windowless, unless a small hole, partly darkened by a board, could be called a window, for by far the greatest part of the daylight came down the wide aperture which did duty as chimney. A stool or two, a shelf with a few bowls and luggies on it, and a black pot for making porridge, were the only household goods ; and a bed-place in the wall, with a dingy blanket spread upon it, and another small recess, with a rough pallet, were its only sleeping accommodations. It immediately struck Donald that this was probably one of the whisky bothies that had so puzzled the gaugers of Dunerdie. Such was the case. The bothy was always at the service of the illicit distillers, and from its lonely situation, and the facilities of concealment which it afforded, was a favourite resort of the smuggling gang. The still was in an old ruinous-looking shed under the rock. Two of the distillers were at that moment putting it in readi-

ness for work ; but a couple of sacks of malt, the huge pot, and other preparations, lay by Lachlan's fireside, and told their own tale. The thing which seemed strange to Donald was the old shepherd's having a large solid chest against the wall—far too good a piece of furniture for such a place. Lachlan always had a plausible answer to give when questioned. He said "it was a stout auld-like thing, an' did fine to put awa the blankets an' bits o' orra things he left in the bothy atween whiles, when maybe he wadna come near the place for months." Could the old chest have spoken, many a tale of hidden malt (ay, and whisky too) it would have told.

But we have left out an important personage in the brief notice of the old bothy—Lachlan's daughter Jean, who sat silently by the fire arranging thin pieces of bog-fir, technically called "spunk-wood," burnt in lieu of candles, and also for making bright fires, all through the Highlands.

Having offered his guests an oaten bannock apiece and a dram of strong whisky, Lachlan went

out to assist in the still, leaving the other three occupants of the cottage by the fire—Peter smoking his pipe, Donald tormented by his own thoughts, and yet more so by visions of the future. An hour or two had passed. Jean had finished her work, and had commenced a wild random conversation with Campbell, when her father came hastily in, followed by a little bare-legged, shock-headed urchin, who panted for breath, and chattered Gaelic with astounding volubility. “Jean, lass,” cried Lachlan, “the gauger is after us, riding up the glen on his powny. Wee Jamie has been on his track a’ day; he’s seen the ither man an’ the assistant turn up wast by Cor-na-Clach, an’ Maister Wilson himsell’s comin’ up.”

“Hoot, father, that’s real luck! we’ll save the maut an’ a’, gin it be yon chiel,” quoth the damsel, with a contemptuous snap of her fingers at the bare mention of Wilson’s name. “But ye maun leave a’ to me. Whar’s the lads?”

“Gane to make the ither bothy safe. I’ll be aff wi’ the maut sacks. ’Od, Peter, but ye’ll hae to

tak the muckle pat ; it's geyan weighty. Donald, bide you wi' Jean. Your ain fouk sall get word o' ye the nicht," said Lachlan, suiting the action to the word, and hurrying off with the sacks, closely followed by Peter with the huge pot. Jean proceeded to lock the door, and then, displacing a couple of boards behind one of the beds, lighted a spunk, and made a sign to Donald to follow her directions. When the boards were removed, a dark hole was to be seen—in fact, a hiding-place, partly in the turf wall, and partly hollowed out of the peat-and-wood stack, which was put together with seeming carelessness, but with real art and solidity. Bidding Donald keep still, and wait with patience till he was let out of durance, Jean put up the boards in a trice, and rearranged the bed as before.

CHAPTER VI.

ONCE fairly in his hole, Donald found there was room to sit, or even lie down, and through the chinks of the boards he could still keep an eye on the proceedings within the bothy. "Donald," said Jean, "dinna think yoursell forgotten gin you're left a whilie your lane ; for, if I can, I'll hae to gang an' help wast, in the bothy. There's mair to do there than here ; but I'll come to you in a gliff, sae keep you douce an' still."

Donald watched with curiosity all the girl's movements, which were principally directed to giving as great an air of comfort to the bothy as possible. Putting a few chips of fir on the fire, which blazed up cheerily, Jean pulled out a worsted stocking, and, seating herself on a low stool near the chimney, began to sing a Gaelic song. It was

a picturesque interior, lighted by the red glow of the fire ; Jean herself being no mean addition to the picture, sitting there in her purple linsey-woolsey petticoat and loose linen shortgown. Although bold-looking, she was a very handsome creature, both taller and stouter than her father ; and often would go for the sheep when rough weather and wintry storms would have overpowered one of more feminine nature. Few among her male acquaintance ever dared to dispute, or even attempt a joke, with "big Jean," for she had been known to use her hands with remarkable vigour on more than one occasion. Scarcely had she settled herself on her stool, when a rap upon the door, and calls for Lachlan from without, showed that the enemy had arrived ; but Jean took no heed for some time : at length, ceasing her song, she called out, first in Gaelic and then in English, "Lachlan's in the hill wi' his sheep, an' I'm my lane in the house. I'll no let ye ower the door, ye trampin' body."

"Let me in, lassie ! It's me, Maister Wilson the supervisor ; I'm wantin' to speak to you or Lachlan

on business, sae dinna keep me shiverin' here, for I'm wet and cold, and the mist has fairly frozen my banes."

"Eh ! gude preserve us, sir !" said Jean, with a change of tone which proved her to be a consummate actress, "I ask your pardon ; come in outower ;" and Jean hurried to open the door and admit the new-comer. A greater contrast could not be seen than the tall masculine damsel and the little half-drowned gauger, who stood there, dripping and quaking with wet and cold, having tied up his draggled pony in the best-sheltered corner of the sheepfold. "Bless me, sir, but I'm real sorry to see a gentleman like yersell oot on sic an awfu' day. My father was misdoutin' he wad ever get the sheep doun the hill for yon mist ; but ye see our master was wantin' the lambs doun, sae we e'en had to come up yestreen ; but it's a terrible eerie place for a lassie a' her lane, sae I aye steek the door. I couldna be expectin' an honour like this, sir, ye ken, or it wad hae been open for ye," continued Jean, with a sly glance at the supervisor. He was not allowed long to remain

outside ; and before he knew where he was, he found himself gently pushed into the best chair and warmest corner, his soaked plaid hung up to 'dry, and the fire stirred to a blaze by his eager hostess, who immediately offered oatcake and cheese, and from a snug-looking black bottle poured out a full bumper of whisky, which she pressed upon her guest with earnest assurance that "it wad keep the cauld oot o' him." Mr Wilson had his foibles ; he dearly loved to be treated as a person of importance ; and more than all, he piqued himself on the way in which the fair sex were (so *he* said) fascinated by him. When he found the bonnie Jean so extremely solicitous for his comfort, and felt the combined influence of the warm fire and good whisky, he began to think that his zeal in pursuit of his duty had fortunately led him into a pleasant situation. Jean played her part admirably, with a mixture of coquetry and simplicity which seemed irresistibly droll to Donald in his den.

"My bonnie kind lass," quoth Wilson, when his glass was empty, "ken ye what I'm come for?

Folk will talk, ye see, and we were getting word that a couthie lad or two were often about here—ay, and that a sly anker of good whisky was often to be got here from your father. What say ye to that, my bonnie woman?” said he, chucking Jean under the chin.

“ Preserve us ! did ever ye hear the like ! Maister Wilson, I can but bid ye seek an’ see. I canna say that ne’er a lad comes here, for ye ken, sir (casting down her eyes), there’s no sae ill-faured a lass but ’ill hae a joe or twa. Eh ! it’s terrible bad o’ the folks to be speakin’ siccan things. Makin’ o’ whisky ! oh, gin I could be assistin’ in sic wickedness, and no doing my duty to the laws an’ the Queen. Maister Wilson, a’body says you’re just a lanthorn o’ justice : dinna ye even me to that —me that’s often wished to see the supervisor that is a real gentleman. Ochone ! ochone ! dinna think sae ill o’ puir lonely Jeanie !” Hereupon she burst into tears in so pathetic a manner that even a harder heart than the supervisor’s would have felt obliged to raise the sobbing beauty from her knees,

on which she had flung herself. Sooth to say, he had a deal to do in the comforting line before she was pacified ; and whenever he attempted to let her go, such storms of sobbing and piteous “ ochones ” arose, that finally Mr Wilson thought himself obliged to seat her close to himself; and whilst he supported her in the kindest manner, he thought her very handsome, and himself truly fascinating.

“ And sae you would like to see the toun ? ” said he, after a little more talk. “ Weel, my dearie, never fear but you shall : I’ll hae you doun, as sure as my name’s Thomas Wilson ; but, my doo ! sit up like a gude lass the noo, and let me gang search through the house, for my two men are to join me here from Cor-na-Clach, and I canna be found daffin’ wi’ you, my sweet lambie, and no to hae ony account to gie them o’ what’s in the bothy.” Now, as a faithful historian, I must confess that the gauger would far sooner have continued his flirtation with his fair hostess, who seemed perfectly contented with her companion, but who in reality was exulting at the idea of all the time she was gaining for her father

and his friends, now busy hiding the dangerous contents of the still. Mr Wilson rose and began a careful inspection, turning the blankets of the beds, examining the walls, and even looking under the heaps of spunk-wood. "It really seems all right, Jeanie, lass ! and yet we thought for sure that we would find ye out this day. I wadna send the men here, that I might be the lucky finder myself ; but I maun tak a look out-by the house—yon rocks might hide many a thing, I doubt." The gauger accordingly prepared to take his plaid, and carry his threat into execution ; but Jean sprang to her feet with a smile, exclaiming, "A bonny ane ye are to seek, an' my big girnel there, that you've forgotten ; but honest fouk are aye ready for a' comers." So, unlocking the great kist, whose ponderous lid she raised with some difficulty, she held up a burning spunk, and invited a nearer inspection of the contents. Now, Jean knew perfectly that in a corner of this convenient receptacle there was a very small heap of malt, the remains of their old store, and that, except this and an old plaid, there was nothing else in the chest.

Quick as thought, the supervisor's eye caught sight of the malt, and he eagerly leaned over the girdel to be sure of the fact ; but quicker still did the treacherous fair one execute a purpose cherished and matured in her thoughts ever since the gauger's appearance : for to warm and comfort him, and send him down the glen happy and cheery, was no part of the reception which she thought was merited at her hands by one of his calling. Jean was, as we have said, taller and stronger than most women ; so, taking the opportunity of the gauger's attention being fixed on the malt, in much less time than it takes to tell, she caught him round the waist, deposited him at the bottom of the girdel with a thump, which took the breath out of his body, banged down the lid with such hearty good-will, that the spring-lock closed ; and Mr Wilson, swear and rage as he might, was as fairly caught as ever rat was in a trap.

Setting her arms akimbo, Jean burst into such peals of laughter that the old walls rang again : the more the unlucky prisoner stamped and kicked,

the heartier she laughed. "Let me oot, let me oot, Jean, darling! I'll gie ye a pound-note gin ye'll let me oot," screamed he.

"Na, na, my bonnie wee mannie; sae ye thocht to fleech an' daff wi' big Jean o' the Glen, a' to get word against her auld father an' his friends frae her. Ye meesrable wee creatur, ye can breathe fine through the cracks o' my auld kist, an' there ye sall bide till yer ain twa lads come. Think o' them catching ye there, hidden awa in a lassie's girdle! 'Odsake, but I'm fit to burst wi' laughin'," and Jean suited the action to the word by redoubled merriment. She laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks, and between the joyous peals continued—"Wow, gauger lad! but ye think to see me in your toun; hae ye a bonnie muckle kistie for me like that ane? But I'm no willin' to hae your death on my hands, sae I'll e'en leave the key on the tap o' ye for yer men when they come. Gin I were to let ye starve, you'd be an awesome ugly bogle to be comin' aboot the bothy!" Banging down the key, off ran Jean to assist her father,

and relate her treatment of the unlucky supervisor.

The smugglers had had time to hide everything, and they were just sinking the big pot in the moss, preparatory to decamping for the present, when she joined them. Leaving little Jamie to spy the gauger's proceedings, the party got safely off with many a joke, and much praise of Jean's outwitting the gauger.

Mr Wilson would have been, if possible, more enraged than he was, had he known of the secret spectator of his misfortune. He felt, however, sufficiently incensed ; he called and shouted till he was hoarse ; and when his assistants arrived, at what was apparently an empty house, they were mightily astonished at hearing, from some unseen place of confinement, an imploring voice begging for freedom.

One of the men rapped with his stick on the box, and the gauger roared for mercy, thinking that he would never be taken out of his durance. As soon as they made out what was the matter, they opened

the chest and set him at liberty, the angry little man vowing vengeance on the smugglers and their haunts, but obstinately refusing to name the enemy who had played him so malicious a trick.

As none of the party had been successful in their search, there was nothing to do but to get home as fast as they could. The whisky bothy was perfectly empty ; so, burning down the roof, and injuring it to the best of their power, they left the glen to its usual wild solitude, and proceeded homewards—the assistants indulging in many a sly joke at their crestfallen and sulky chief, who scarcely spoke a word to them all the way.

CHAPTER VII.

THE family at Kin-Rhynie were all gathered round their hearth, the two women working, and John busy casting up accounts at a little table, when a startled wild-looking neighbour woman opened the door without ceremony, and abruptly entered exclaiming—"Oh, Mistress Cameron! hae ye heard the news? black news it 'ill be to you an' yours this mony a day." She hastily added, as the widow grew deadly pale, "No that Donald's hurt himsell, but och! he's been a wild lad this day!"

"What is it?—for pity's sake tell us. Dinna ye see my mither's in a dwam?" cried Jessie, whilst John pushed away his writing, and came to his mother's side.

"Weel," continued the gossiping neighbour, dwelling on each particular horror with a kind of delight, "your bonnie callant has just shot Maister

Laurie, the Laird's keeper, as dead's a stane ! Laurie fand Campbell an' Donald after the deer. Donald first tried to droun him by the Craig Linn, an' then he shot him clean through, honest man ! I saw him carried hame, bluidy an' stiff ; and, och the day ! to see his puir wife an' bairns rinnin' oot like crazy folk ! Oh but he's an awfu' sinner, that lad o' yours ; sae young an' sae hardened. He's to be hangit at Inverness, they're sayin', for sure."

"Go your ways and leave us, you croaking corbie," said John, as his pale mother sank down in a dead faint on the settle. Jessie flew to her assistance.

"Dinna misca' an honest woman, Maister John, when your ain kith an' kin is gaun to jail wi' rogues and murderers," replied the neighbour, who moved off, recking little of the deadly wound she had inflicted on those loving hearts. Her whole soul was bent upon the delight of spreading so startling a piece of news from house to house, with the usual amplifications to each successive edition of her tale.

She had no sooner closed the door, than the

brother and sister busied themselves with their mother, who still lay on the settle, cold and insensible. "If yon wife speaks true," said John, "better for her to lie there, neither heedin' or hearin', than to wauken to what she'll hae to bear."

"Oh! Johnnie, dinna say't; it isna, canna be true," replied Jessie, gazing intently into her brother's eyes. Such a look of misery as she met had but one meaning; and exclaiming, "Johnnie! Johnnie! God help us a'!" Jessie began to weep as though her heart would break.

"I'll rin down to the clachan and hear the rights o't; better ken the warst than be in dout," said John, snatching up his bonnet and hurrying off down the glen.

Poor Jessie! her mother heard the door shut, and faintly speaking, she raised her head to look piteously in the tear-stained anxious face bending over her.

"Oh, Jessie, is it come to this! My fair-haired Donald—my bonnie wee laddie! to be a murderer an' a thief; for what is poaching but stealing?"

It's a hard blow to bear," said the widow, shuddering.

"I canna think it's true," replied Jessie. "Donald wadna hurt a flee, an' Mr Laurie has aye been gude to us. Oh, mammie! be sure that Johnnie will bring us gude news."

"Na, lass, I feel in my heart it's true! Think on Donald's hot temper! for sure he'll hae been pitten forward by yon bad Campbell, an' I'll never see my ain innocent lad again. Oh! my son, my son!" The poor mother's grief broke forth again, as she rocked to and fro in speechless agony.

Many apparently insignificant circumstances, proving Donald's growing intimacy with the ruffian set on the Black Muir, now came back to Jessie's mind, forming a chain of evidence, alas! too probable to her affectionate and anxious solicitude. Yet she did her best to take the brightest view of things, and to comfort her poor mother; but the minutes seemed hours, till the listeners caught the sound of rapid steps, and of Allister Stuart's welcome voice calling out, before he was inside the

door, "Laurie's no dead, nor like to dee ; he's no sae muckle hurt, after a' ; and Donald's no taen, nor hae they seen onything o' either him or Campbell since," continued he, seizing Jessie's hand, half squeezing it off in his enthusiasm, and turning just in time to support the widow, who nearly swooned again from the sudden uplifting of the hideous fear which had overpowered her. A few moments of silence and tears, with smiles from Jessie like sunbeams struggling through the mist, and then Allister was eagerly called on to begin his tale. He too had heard the exaggerated version in Dunerdie—for the family at Kin-Rhynie had always been too great favourites with the most respectable of the neighbours not to be envied by others, so that any accusation against one of them was greedily listened to. Allister had hoped to be beforehand with the ill-natured woman who ran off to carry the news to Kin-Rhynie, but on the way he was detained, and soon after met John bent on his journey of inquiry. They had scarce exchanged a word ere Innes came cautiously out of the wood,

and related the exact circumstance as it had happened, adding that Donald was well, in safe hiding, and charging them to think of his future course of action, as he would of necessity be compelled to leave his own part of the country immediately.

"Johnnie went on to Laurie's house to see himsell," continued Allister; "he'll be back here belyve; so wi' your leave, Mrs Cameron, I'll wait to hear what he says."

"Bide here, an' welcome," answered she. "Och! my heart is sair; for although, by the mercy o' the Lord, my laddie is no a murderer, yet he fired the gun wi' the will to harm a fellow-creature, an' I canna think on yon fearfu' glen without a shiver!"

"Still, ye maun mind it was to save the laddie M'Kay he put his ain life in peril. Innes said *he* wadna hae recrossed that water for fifty pounds his lane; an' Donald, forby helping Tam, had a gun to weigh him down as well," objected Allister. But the women only shook their heads and sighed. Many plans were formed and talked over for the fugitive, but John's return ended the discussion.

Wearily and dejectedly he shut the door, and came to his mother's side. "Little did I ever think to hear the hard words frae our Laird, an' hear wi' patience the things said o' us, ane an' a', that I hae tholed this day! Donald has mair to answer for than the bad business itself, for he has spoiled our good name an' credit through the toun. It will be lang ere we can hand up our heads again in Dunerdie. Laurie's arm and shoulder are sair hurt; and though even he owns the saving Tam M'Kay was a brave turn o' our puir lad's, baith he an' the Laird say, nae stane will be left unturned to bring him to justice. They say, with his better up-bringing an' a' your care, mother, he has set so terrible bad an example to a' the place, that it is but their duty to punish him; and indeed, Allister, you maunna be fand here, for a' that stand wi' us this nicht will be oot o' favour wi' the Laird."

"I carena a single straw for that, Johnnie, gin I can help an' uphaud them that I have aye fand good friends to me an' mine—that's a' I seek for—an' maybe," he added in a lower tone, "a kind

word frae Jessie into the bargain." Jessie's eyes said as plainly as eyes could say, that he might reckon upon ample payment of that sort; the widow thanked and blessed him, whilst John wrung his hand in silence.

After some vague plans quickly formed, and as soon abandoned, Allister said, as though struck suddenly by the thought—"Did ye hear that young Robertson would be ower glad to bide this year wi' his ain folk, only he's paid his passage and a' that to Australia wi' the rest o' them? Let Donald get to the sea in his stead, an' gae oot in his name. Wha kens he may become a rich man oot there! It's far awa, but he would gang wi' friends; an' I doutna the roving tastes he has would find work there."

The three listeners received this proposal very differently. Jessie's tears started afresh; her mother, covering her face with her apron, trembled like a leaf; and John, looking quickly up, at once closed with it. "You're right! though bad's the best, that's our only chance. There's nae time

to spare, for they gang the morn's nicht, I hear. We maun settle it wi' the Robisons ; they'll be sure to act friendly at this pinch. My mother an' Jess maun get a wheen claes thegither ; and I'll hae to find Donald's hiding-place, an' get him ready. Oh, mither ! dinna look sae pitifu' ; it's sad eneuch to part ; but to see our bonnie laddie in an eerie prison, syne in the Court afore the Lords, an' syne transportit like a thief, wad be waur for us a'," said John, soothingly, to his mother. "As to money," he went on, "I daursay you can let me hae some till I get my thirty out o' the bank, an' I got ten mair for my wark this summer. No, Allister, lad, ye needna offer me credit ; I can do nae better thing wi' my earnings than save my brither ; an' wha'll say but this sorrow may be the savin' o' him ! Sae cheer up, mother, an' set to your wark at ance."

"John Cameron, you are a gude brither an' a gude son, and the Lord will reward you," piously ejaculated his mother. "But, oh ! I canna lose my bairn without ae look at his bonnie face ! Ye canna ask it o' me. I'll gang ower hill an' brae, but I

maun see him to bless him before I lose him, my ain darlin' Donald," said she, clinging to her son's arm. He promised to satisfy her ; and then it was settled that Allister should see William Robertson, in order to arrange matters with him, whilst John went in search of Innes, and got word of Donald.

The young men prepared the women for the probable visit of the police-officer in search of the fugitive, and charged them to begin no preparations till after that was over. Taking an affectionate leave of both, the friends departed ; and soon the poor inmates of Kin-Rhynie had to bear the so-called visits of condolence of their few neighbours in the glen, and to get rid of them as best they might ; and next to see, confront, and answer the policeman and others who came to search thoroughly over the house and premises for traces of Donald. Fortunately a fancied clue to his whereabouts led the party to imagine him gone towards Athole, so that a person had actually been despatched that way in pursuit.

This circumstance, and the evident ignorance on

the subject of his mother and sister, who gave every facility to the searchers through loft, barn, and house, cut the visit to Kin-Rhynie short ; so that ere the night was far gone, the women had, with many a sob and lamentation, got together the best part of poor Donald's wardrobe, and sat mournfully awaiting the result of John's expedition.

At last he came : all had so far succeeded : he had seen Innes. Young Willie Robertson was glad enough to serve his own ends, and assist his friends at the same time. He was, therefore, to return from the port after seeing his family embark. Allister had been able to get the money, and the sum was sufficient to reimburse Willie for all the arrangements.

Nothing now remained but to see Donald again, and then to part for years, probably for ever !

There had been so much to do and think about all this memorable evening, that the widow had felt it her duty to keep her grief under control, and to try not to give way ; but the restless anxiety, and perpetual hurry to and fro, showed the struggle

within. Food was laid ready, the fire replenished, whilst many and many an anxious "whisht" was uttered as some fancied sound without seemed like a footstep. All these, and, still more, the poor women's faces of suffering, told their tale of miserable expectation.

They sat waiting, wondering, and hoping, till after midnight, when, with slow cautious steps—oh, how different to his usual merry entrance!—Donald slunk home, weary, wretched, and contrite. But the depth of motherly and sisterly love knows no bounds, and, in spite of their sense of his guilt, he was received by the widow and Jessie as though all were forgotten, save the one fact that he was likely to escape from danger, and as though nothing remained to wish for, now that he was in their arms once more.

What a miserable night that was to all our poor friends! Donald bitterly lamented his past disregard of advice and warnings; related step by step how he had been led on by his bad associates, and owned how often he had given way to their tempt-

ing offers of amusement. The thoughts of all that his family would have to bear on his account weighed down his spirit, and the gay Donald looked haggard and miserable. He had heard quite enough whilst in the glen bothy (whither Lachlan, Campbell, and Jean had returned soon after the gauger's departure) to make him only too thankful that means had been devised for his escape, although he had previously entertained no thoughts of emigrating. Sad was the expression of his mother's pale face as she listened to him perhaps for the last time in this world ; and closer and closer she crept to his side, gazing on that handsome face which she never more might see.

Innes had undertaken to guide Donald over the hill to the first convenient place for getting to the seaport where the emigrants were to embark. It was truly a bitter feeling to Donald when he thought that by one rash and lawless act he had caused all this sorrow to those he loved best. When he heard of his brother's generous sacrifice of all his little fortune, shame and sorrow overcame his

assumed fortitude, and he wept bitterly. Too soon—long ere half had been said they wished to say, though hours had passed—came a low tap at the door, and a warning from Innes that “the mist was liftin’, an’ they had better be awa.”

Mrs Cameron, starting at the words, clasped her son to her heart, exclaiming wildly, “My bairn, my bairn ! I canna lose you, my heart is breakin’. Oh ! gin I were cauld in my grave, it wad be better than never again to hae ye in my arms, my ain darlin’ son.” The poor creature’s grief was too heart-rending even for Innes to withstand, and something very like a tear stole down his rough cheek, whilst Jessie held Donald’s hand in hers, and sobbed convulsively. John leaned against the chimney, hiding his face from the rest, and vainly attempting to bring out a word of comfort. At length the scene was brought to an end by Donald himself, who, with a desperate effort, spoke gently to his mother—“Dinna greet sae sadly, mither dear ; ye’ll yet hae Jess an’ Johnnie to be better bairns, an’ behave mair dutifully than ever I hae done ; an’ wha kens

but I may make a fortune, an' be the comfort o' your auld days? Bless ye for a' yer love to me, my ain dear mither;" then, tenderly kissing her, he turned to his sister, embraced her, bidding her thank Allister for all he had done in the way of kindness to him, and, grasping John's hand silently, but with looks more eloquent than words, he seized the pack of clothes which lay ready, and, taking a long lingering look around the dear old home he was leaving, strode towards the door. But quicker than his lingering step, his mother ran towards him, and again hung round his neck as though she could not let him leave her. Gently unclasping her trembling hands, and putting her into Jessie's arms, with one choking "God bless an' keep ye a'!" he darted out, followed by Innes; and those he left remained in speechless misery.

CHAPTER VIII.

SOME weeks had elapsed since Donald Cameron's departure, and young Robertson had returned home again, to the surprise of all his neighbours. He was the bearer of a letter from Donald to Mr Laurie, humbly expressing the writer's contrition for his conduct, and hoping that his mother and brother would not be in any way the sufferers by his fault. He assured the keeper of his horror when he had seen him fall wounded, and ended by hoping that this sad adventure had been the means of turning him from his evil ways. It was a very good letter, having the stamp of straightforwardness and genuine feeling, and the keeper received it in a kind spirit. He was so much less hurt than had at first been supposed, that a few days' rest nearly restored him; and he called on the widow soon after, to

promise that, as her son was out of the country, he would say nothing more, but of course had he remained he would have had to bring him to justice and punishment. The Laird thought a good deal of the affair, but altogether the widow heard less from high quarters than did her children from their neighbours, who of course recapitulated every minute particular, and some not without a secret satisfaction at thus being able to get an ill-natured fling at the Camerons. Maggie Robertson wrote to Jessie, promising to be kind and watchful over the poor exile; and as the ship had sailed with a fair wind, and every prospect of a prosperous voyage, all had gone as favourably as could have been wished.

After a few days of violent sorrow, the widow's grief took a more subdued and passive character, the watchful tenderness of her daughter sparing her every possible augmentation of her regret. John engaged to assist in the coming harvest as a labourer, as no mason-work was going on at that time, and he could not remain idle. And so the summer was passing into autumn, with its ripe har-

vest-fields and golden-tinted woods, and the Camerons bore their burden meekly and unrepiningly. There was little change or variety in their saddened life, till one Sabbath morning at the kirk they were met by Mrs Cumming, with the news that she was come to Dunerdie to receive her auntie and sister on the succeeding day. The next thing they heard was that the travellers had arrived, and a message was brought from Katie Cumming requesting Jessie to go down and visit them before her departure to her own home. M'Pherson's farm was a large one, the dwelling-house stood on a knoll at the end of the glen, overlooking the junction of the river with the noisy Rhynie, which rushed swiftly into the larger and more sluggish stream. The farmhouse was whitewashed, and looked the very picture of cheerfulness as the sunshine played on its windows, and lighted up the scarlet clusters of the rowan-tree at the west gable. Jessie walked round to the back-door, and timidly entered the roomy kitchen, where sat Katie nursing her child, and watching with secret amusement a diminutive

elderly woman, brisk as a bee, unpacking crockery from a small crate, ever and anon climbing up on the dresser to arrange the plates and bowls on its high shelves, and thereby displaying a sturdy pair of legs in black woollen stockings, and two neat, little, square, busy-looking feet. A gown drawn up through the pocket-hole and a tremendous white cap completed the costume of Aunt Eppy, who turned her puckered wrinkled face, with its sharp black twinkling eyes and kindly smile, towards the new-comer.

“That ’ill be Jessie Cameron, I’s e warrant. Weel I mind her mither, just sic another lass about thirty year sin’! Ye’ll no be expectin’ me to stop my wark to mak my compliments to ye. Noo, lass, but ye’ve purpose-like decent shoon. My certy, it wad be weel in our Bell gin she were as wise-like,” said the little woman, looking admiringly on Jessie’s stout brogues; for Aunt Eppy thought that to be “purpose-like” was the height of perfection, and Jessie’s dress and appearance strongly impressed the old lady in her favour.

“ Bide a wee, my dear, and I’ll call Bell doun the stair ; but a begun turn’s half ended, ye ken. I hae thae bits o’ crocks to pit orderly, and fule’s haste is nae speed ; so crack a wee wi’ mistress Kate and the bairn.”

But before Auntie had finished her arrangements, Bell came rushing in, and, running up to Jessie, exclaimed, “ Dear Jessie, I am sae happy to see you again ; I mind your face as weel as though I had never left our ain bonnie strath. I am sae blithe to get to my hame that I was fain to kiss the auld collie when he cam oot waggin’ his tail to meet me. I could dance a fling a’ my lane, it is sae heartsome to be oot o’ yon weary toun.”

“ Ay,” said Katie, “ and to be awa frae auld uncle and auntie Reed, an’ a’ their scoldings.”

“ Scoldings ! pity me for a’ I hae gotten,” laughed Bell ; “ twa perjink auld folks that wad never let me frae their sicht early or late. But Kate, woman, dinna think o’ that when I am sae blithe to be at hame for gude.”

“ Ill bairns are aye best heard at hame,” said Aunt

Eppy mischievously, from her perch. " We'll maybe hae to scold you here, too, gin ye gang about sae wild-like as ye hae a' this blessed day."

" Hoot, auntie, you're aye the first yersell to spoil her," said Katie ; " an' what wi' an auld father, an' auntie too, if Jessie doesna keep an ee on her, I'm sure she'll pit ye a' ajee."

" 'Deed will I, gin I get the chance, my wise sister ! So ye'll e'en be obliged to look after us a', Jessie ; we're no that muckle far frae your glen, ye see."

And thus they laughed and chatted. Jessie was enchanted with Bell, Aunt Eppy, and all, thinking it very delightful to be so warmly received by such kind folk.

Bell M'Pherson was one of the prettiest creatures that had ever been seen in Dunerdie. Jessie was a handsome sonsy lass, but Bell had a look of arch mischief in her dark-blue eyes that showed she might be a fascinating little torment if she chose. She had a slight graceful figure, with golden hair that glittered in the sunshine, and, with her pretty

blush-rose complexion, was in truth very lovely, and as affectionate as she was bonnie. Accustomed to admiration wherever she went, she was somewhat vain and capricious, and a wee bit obstinate, but withal a very charming little maiden.

In a short time she became very intimate with Jessie; and although the latter was steadier, and occasionally took the bonnie Bell to task for some of her wild pranks, yet she too was so merry and spirited that there was great sympathy between them. Ere long Bell was acknowledged the beauty of Dunerdie, and all the lads were her slaves.

When she came into the reaping-fields in her dainty little snow-white shortgown and trim blue petticoat, by way of doing a good day's work for her father, it was a contest who should be the fortunate man to reap for her binding. But unluckily, after an hour or two the mischievous lassie would tire of work, and then would begin such mirth and fun, that even old Leezie, who had worked on the farm thirty years, would put down her sickle to listen to the laughter, and to look at the wild girl

in her glee. Occasionally, however, her father caught her at her pranks, and then he would threaten to send her off home, with the alternative of binding in the reaping-field between old Leezie and deaf Robert ; whilst Jessie, on the other hand, he pronounced a first-rate worker, and said " it was nae wonder though she cut the clayach." Probably few of my readers know what that is, and therefore I shall explain. The last few stalks of corn which are cut during harvest are so called ; and the fortunate reaper is certain of all sorts of good-luck, besides the privilege of dressing the little sheaf with ribbons or flowers ; of hanging it up in the house-parlour till New Year's Day, when it is tied on the head of the best horse of the farm, and goes from house to house in a sort of triumphal progress. Jessie fully thought she had cut it, but screams of delight from Bell, a minute or two later, undeceived her. She then saw that, by old Robert's connivance, Bell had still a few ears to cut from behind a heap of stooks. With no small pride did the little beauty perform her part ; and nothing could equal her triumph as

she carried her prize home, tormenting Jessie about her defeat all the way up to the farm.

The defeated, however, was soon called into council to assist in ornamenting the clayach with ribbons and roses (which Bell recklessly cut out of her best bonnet for the purpose), and it was duly hung up in a conspicuous place in the parlour, where we shall leave it to gather dust in peace.

All this time Jessie had frequently seen Allister Stuart, both at home and abroad, but since Donald's departure she had so entirely devoted herself to her mother, that she seldom left Kin-Rhynie except to go to her work. Allister was busy with the Laird's harvest, so that their meetings were not, perhaps, quite so often repeated as they wished.

The widow frequently was fretful and unhappy ; grief had rendered her temper somewhat querulous, therefore Jessie would not leave her, even for a chance-meeting with Allister.

It is doubtful if Jessie was aware at this time how much she cared for him, but his affectionate kindness to her at the time of her sorrow, not for-

getting the efforts which he made to excuse Donald to Laurie and the Laird too, had greatly endeared him to her honest heart. One Sabbath afternoon, as she sat reading a chapter to her mother, Allister made his appearance, with a request that John and his sister would take a walk with him "to see Bell that bonnie day." Nothing loth, they departed; but on reaching the turn to M'Pherson's farm, Allister said to John rather awkwardly, though endeavouring to turn it off with a laugh, "Johnnie, I hae a word to say, an' a spot to show Jessie down by the water. Couldna ye gang up first, just to make sure Bell an' Aunt Eppy are at hame? for whiles they gang up the village after the kirk. We'll no be lang."

John good-naturedly took himself off, and the pair bent their steps towards the river's bank. Jessie's heart beat fast, and she felt for the first time rather shy with Allister; but then it was, she thought, so odd of him to take her out, and then walk silently by her side. She scarce knew what to make of it. At length, after passing along the rocky bank overhanging the water, they reached

the point where Rhynie joined the larger river ; and not till Allister had seated his companion on a rock, and taken his place at her side, did he begin his tale. “ Jessie, I daursay ye’re wondering what for I brocht ye here, an’ I wish nae person but mysell to tell ye the reason. Last nicht I was speaking to the Laird ; he’s wonderfu’ kind, an’ says I hae profited much by my learning at the places I’ve been to : sae he wants me to take charge of a farm that he’s even now making o’ the new lands we’re reclaiming ; ay ! an’ a bonnie bit by the river-side, too ! He’s to build a house to me in spring, and, Jessie, yon’s the place,” said Allister, pointing to the opposite side of the river, where a green meadow, fringed with alders, looked most inviting in the sunshine. “ Ay !” he continued, “ this time next year I hope, instead of yon auld birch by the wee burn, to see a couthie housie, for it’s a bonnie bit : an’ then, Jessie, when I hae the house to take her to, I’ll want the bonniest wife in Dunerdie to take care o’t, sae I’m just seeking her. Can ye gie me nae help, dear lassie ?” said Allister, looking into Jessie’s downcast face.

"Bell M'Pherson's far the bonniest lass in the haill country," began she in reply; but it would not do, for her cheeks grew rosy as the sunset clouds above her; and Allister said tenderly to her, "You ken weel eneuch I loe ne'er a ane but your ain dear sell, Jessie. I would sooner hae you for a wife than e'er a tochered lass in the strath. But ye maun tell me gin ye loe me weel eneuch to tak me, for though yer een look terrible bonnie wi' thae lang lashes hanging ower your cheek, I wad like to see your face a bit better."

Jessie's head sank lower and lower, but at last, looking up at him with an expression of intense feeling, the lassie spoke. "Do I loe ye, Allister?—naebody on earth kens how deep an' strong my love for you is. I'm no that bonnie, nor hae I siller, but oh ! lad, gin the love of a warm heart, that's your ain for gude an' for aye, can stand ye instead of tocher an' gude looks, blithely can I gie ye heart an' hand;" and Jessie's swimming eyes looked brighter than ever as she raised them for one look at Allister.

The sequel of the story — well, anybody can guess that : suffice it here to say, poor John had a long time to wait whilst the lovers held their interesting conversation. Jessie then walked home proudly with “her ain Allister,” to gladden her mother’s heart by her news, and still more by the sight of her joyous face. Allister duly informed Johnnie, who was also delighted. A happy supper together terminated this auspicious day, which to Jessie ended in a sleepless night, with waking dreams of the future, visions of Allister, and such a state of happiness that she could scarce credit it herself.

Allister had told her he should again be obliged to leave home about the new year, to go into Ayrshire on agricultural business for the Laird, but that in spring or early summer, when the new house was built, they should be married immediately. John was to get the mason-work of the projected building, which was a good thing for him ; so that the family at Kin-Rhynie were indeed joyful at their pleasant prospects.

CHAPTER IX.

It may be imagined that Bell was not left long in ignorance of her friend Jessie's engagement ; and how the bonnie lassie danced for joy ! how she joked and tormented the lovers, and what plans she made for the wedding, with the subsequent housewarming ! only regretting that so long a time must elapse before it all took place.

Little Bell's beauty and vivacity, to say nothing of the goodly dower which awaited her, had brought all the youth of Dunerdie to her feet : she reigned over her devoted slaves in despotic fashion. Aunt Eppy worshipped the very ground she trod, and, sooth to say, filled that pretty head with absurd notions of its irresistible fascinations. Bell liked to be teased about her " lads," and was but too willing to listen when Aunt Eppy talked of her conquests.

“Hoot awa, lass; did ever I see the like?” would she say. “Frae Gordon the auld merchant, doun to Peter the herd laddie, the men are a’ wud for ye; gin ye give a glisk to ane, a’ the ithers will look like thunder! Mony’s the ceevility I get for your sake. It’s a true word, that mony ane kisses the bairn for love o’ the nurse; but I’ll wager, mony ane cracks wi’ the auntie for love o’ the niece. Didna Sandy o’ the Croft send down his best apples to me, an’ Habbie o’ the Mill a sack of white flour, an’ Jamie Smith a bonnie hamespun plaid, and—”

“Gudesake, auntie, dinna fash,” said Bell; “I’m bonnie eneuch to them that loe me, and ower bonnie to them that loe me an’ canna get me. I ken it weel. I like to get my joke an’ my daffin’, but no to be plagued wi’ the courtin’ o’ thae weary men. Wow! but they are a fule-like set. I’d gar them say black’s white gin I chose. Lassies are worth three o’ them ony day,” laughed the damsel, audibly enough to elicit sighs and long faces from one or two of the “lads” alluded to; for the dialogue took place near the stackyard, where the tall stacks

proclaimed a plenteous harvest, as one by one they were erected and scientifically thatched.

The fair tyrant had ample opportunity for receiving her court, as Farmer M'Pherson loved to have a comfortable party in his roomy kitchen of an evening ; and while the elders smoked their pipes or discussed the news with him at his side of the roaring fire, many of the younger neighbours would drop in one by one, and gather round Bell as she sat at her wheel, while Aunt Eppy knitted stockings, scolded, joked, or advised the young folks. Some of the lads would bring their sisters, and the evenings were generally pretty merry within, though wintry winds and driving showers without whistled through the rowan and birch trees. The only young man who kept totally aloof from Bell and her set was John Cameron ; Jessie usually had Allister's escort when she went down to the farm, and Johnnie preferred his books and his old mother's quiet hearth to all the merriment in Dunerdie.

"Ye may spare a' your bonnie smiles and genty ways, Bell," said Rosie Gow, one of her gay asso-

ciates ; " John Cameron will never so much as turn round to see ye " (this took place when the lasses and many others were in the field during potato harvest). " Dinna ye see how he passes ye by wi' no sae muckle as a look at ye ? Ye needna waste your time on him, for he's far ower determined no to hae onything to do wi' ye."

" Muckle I care for him, truly," retorted Bell. " Jessie is a gude lassie, and I loe her dearly, but John's a dour lad, and no worth heedin'."

" Weel," continued Rose, " I for ane wad be proud if he took heed o' me, for isna he a bonnie lad ? Sae tall and sae active ; and then sic clear een, they look clean through a body ; and sic a gude son and brother. Gin I had a' the lads at my heels like you, Bell, I'd be thinkin' ae word frae John Cameron worth a' their senseless havers."

" Gude be here," laughed Bell, shaking her glossy hair out of her eyes, " if here isna Rosie Gow clean daft for Johnnie the dominie ; for he's liker ane than aught else. Wow, lass ! but I'd try my chance gin

I were ye. I can tell Jess when next I see her, and she'll help ye a bit."

"Laugh awa!" said Rose, shouldering a great basket of potatoes, preparatory to emptying its contents into the cart near at hand—"Laugh awa, bonnie Bell! but John's a hantle abune your lads, and ye wad get him gin ye could—and ye canna."

Bell pondered o'er all Rose's sayings, and came to the conclusion that she would make a conquest of John, just to prove her power to all Dunerdie; for in her secret thoughts she admitted that there was a something very superior about him. Soon after this, Bell wandered up to Kin-Rhynie one afternoon; and when John came in from his day's work, he found her sitting with Jessie and the widow, cheering the old cottage with her merry laughter, and amusing the widow with her scraps of news and gossip. Conscious that she looked particularly pretty as she sat on a low stool by the old matron's side, Bell held out her hand to Johnnie, without pausing in an animated description she was giving of some adventure of Aunt Eppy's the previous day; and

presently, to her no small delight, Johnnie came and sat down too, to listen and laugh with the rest of the small circle. Bell, being fully determined to charm Johnnie to the utmost of her power, required little pressing from the widow to remain and share the homely supper of potatoes and milk, with nicely baked oaten cakes, and a fine cheese of Jessie's making. As it grew darker, the little coquette carefully arranged her plaid over her head, and made a show of saying good-night to Johnnie as well as to the rest, though she would have been woefully disappointed had he not had the gallantry to offer to escort her through the glen and down to the farm. Indeed, she had been thinking of this moonlit walk for long, and yet she assured John "she wad as sune gang her lane—it was ower muckle trouble to him," &c.

Finally, however, the pair started; and accustomed as she was to compliments and rustic admiration, the beauty of Dunerdie was astonished, and in no small degree disappointed, at finding her escort walk fast, choose the most direct way, speak but little, and

that little chiefly of his mother's health. The widow suffered from a cough and oppression on her chest, and John was anxious to know if Bell thought her looking ill. All the lassie could do was to promise that Aunt Eppy should go and see her, she being in great repute as a doctress; and in the meanwhile she assured John that she had not thought his mother's appearance altered. Nor had she, for the widow had been amused and excited by her visit, and had lost her habitual look of languor and dejection. Arrived in sight of the farm windows, through which the fire flickered cheerily, John stopped and said—

“ There, ye see, ye're hame noo, so I'll just turn back, for they like me to read to them o' nights, an' ye can run in your lane safe now. Gude nicht to ye,” and, merely shaking hands, John strode off up the glen, leaving Bell standing in the road.

“ Ne'er a kind word nor a soft blink did I get,” thought the fair damsel. “ Rose is right; he will never care for me. What matters? A douce grave lad without a spark o' spunk—what need I care? I

dinna like to gie't up, as I dinna want the lassies to jeer. After a', I never could look at a puir lad like that. Aunt Eppy says I maun be a rich woman, and keep a horse and gig o' my ain, and consort wi' a' the gentry; and whatfor should I care though a mason lad mair or less thinks me bonnie? Eh, wow! but Johnnie Cameron has a bonnie pair o' een for sure; they glint even in the moonlight. If I could mak him just a wee bit fond o' me, it wad be grand."

With this final resolution Bell went into the house, to find her father and Aunt Eppy at high words about the cow-byres. Auntie was desirous to see their farm-buildings repaired and enlarged; whilst M'Pherson, though he loved his farm well, loved his money better, and would not consent to her suggestions.

Meanwhile the world went on with its bustle and turmoil; there were changes in Dunerdie as elsewhere. The Laird and his lady announced their intention of spending some months in the south; and the news got abroad that the Laird's younger brother, Captain Angus Gordon, was coming to

finish the shooting season, and also to watch over the progress of the new works and improvements till the Laird himself returned. The tenants liked to have one of "the family" among them, so this was considered a piece of good news, though little was known of Angus Gordon in Dunerdie; and the scant recollections of him were principally of an exceedingly spoiled schoolboy, for such he had been at his last visit to his brother.

But what did John Cameron think of Bell by this time? Her endeavours to charm him produced no change in his quiet manners, and he noticed her but little; on the other hand, her genuine affection for Jessie, and frequent kind attentions to his mother in the way of black-currant jelly for her cough, or occasional baskets of eggs and a fat chicken or two, had convinced John that the pretty flirt had a kind heart after all.

Tales of her coquettish ways amongst her admirers came to his ears as a matter of course, and he thought it was a pity so bonnie a lassie should be so wild and reckless. Jessie gave her all the

praise, admiration, and affection that she could spare from her dear Allister, and fought many a battle in her defence when others blamed her.

Things were in this state when Bell's father made up his mind, after sundry estimates and jottings down of figures in his old leathern pocket-book, not only to give the order for great improvements in his farm-buildings, but desired John Cameron to undertake them. As the season was far advanced, and the utmost diligence was required, he requested John to take up his quarters at the farm with the two lads engaged as assistants. John Cameron therefore went down to live at the farm, and Bell wagered Rosie Gow she would bring him to her feet before the end of his stay.

Farmer M'Pherson cared little for his daughter's love affairs; he thought it natural that a bonnie lassie should have her "joes," and contented himself with imagining that years hence she would perhaps marry some wealthy suitor, and become a quiet happily established matron like her elder sister Katie. Indeed, he always considered Bell as a mere child,

which her playful light-hearted ways, and frequently childish merriment, confirmed. So that, as "his ain bonnie bairnie," he was as proud of her as of his prize cow, and that was saying a good deal. It was remarkable the interest Bell now took in the new works. Twenty times a-day would some visit to byre, hen-house, or dairy take her past John as he whistled over his work ; and many a time, as she fed her fowls, looked after the calves, or otherwise took her part in farmyard cares, he involuntarily confessed to himself "that Bell looked a hundred times bonnier when so busy about her work, than when she sat making fun of all the lads of an evening."

One night, when Aunt Eppy had gone out, and the farmer was asleep in his arm-chair, Bell sat looking at the glowing peats with her hands folded, and such a thoughtful expression on her face, that John Cameron could not help stopping, on his way through the kitchen, to ask her if anything had happened to vex her. "Maybe the hallowe'en ploy is no settled as ye like, or maybe Aunt Eppy hasna

got ye the braw goon she promised ; but something fashes you, I'll wager," said John in rather a joking tone. The pretty face looked more serious at every word he spoke ; and it was with an impatient shrug of her shoulders that Bell answered : " And is it no eneuch to fash me when everybody treats me like a silly bairn that's fit for naething but to get sweeties, an' told to play itsell out-by ? Frae my father an' auntie down to the auld henwife, it's ' dawtie ' an' ' wee pet ' a' day lang. Yersell, John—did ever ye speak to me as though I were a grown woman ? Ye think me an idle foolish bairn, fit for naething but vanities. There's no ae soul but my ain sister Katie that gies me credit for ony wee glimmer o' sense. Why do ye never hae a word for me ? Is't because I'm sae different frae your ain Jessie ? An' whatfor is she mair douce an' wise-like ? Isna it because she has a kind mither to advise her, forby a gude brither to teach her ? An' what hae I ? just left a' my lane, treated like a fule-bairn, wi' nae word o' help frae man or beast ! ' Deed, I'd need to learn patience frae auld

Puss there, that sits by the hour watching for a mousie." Bell spoke rapidly with rising colour, and John was fairly astonished as the dauntless merry beauty sat there with tears in her eyes, and continued seriously : "I ken I'm a daft lassie whiles ; naebody helps me to become ocht else. Gin ye wad tell me my fauts, an' treat me like a bairn if ye will, but a bairnie that wad willingly be better an' wiser, I'd thank ye to my deein' day." And the tears rolled down her cheeks, for Bell was in earnest ; comparisons and reflections, which had come to her mind as she mused alone, had really and sincerely brought on one of her rare fits of humility. At that moment nobody would have imagined she was usually so very different, but would have felt quite sorry for the little penitent face which looked up at John so piteously.

"I wad nae mair tell ye a hard thing, or make ye greet, than I'd loup ower Rhynie Linn," said John kindly. "We a' hae our fauts ; the warst I ever heard o' ye is that ye gie folks a heartache ! I ken your gude heart ower weel to ca' ye a silly bairn.

For advice, or a word frae me, when wad I get a chance o' speakin'? Are ye no aye daffin' an' skirlin' wi' the young founk? And what richt hae I to meddle wi' ye? Na, na, my bonnie lass, it canna be; but I dinna like to see ye greet sae sair; an' gin ever I can do onything to pleasure ye, blithely will I do't, be sure."

"Then, John, gin ye wad whiles read to me oot o' yon book o' yours, it would be such a pleasure. Often daddie an' auntie are no here at e'en. I wad spin twice as weel gin ye read me thae bonnie tales Jessie's aye speakin' o'. I dinna care a preen for the idle young folks, an' I'm only wild because I hae naebody to be wise wi' me."

"Aweel, I'll be ready eneuch to read to ye," said John; "but as to tellin' ye yer fauts, as ye said, I'm sure, beyond your being sae fond o' idle company, I dinna see muckle fauts about ye. Ye're aye gude to me an' mine; I can say frae my heart you are as welcome to my puir dear mither when-e'er ye gae up till her, as the gowan is to the lamb."

After this conversation, probably because he took the trouble to observe her, John saw more womanly feeling and depth in Bell's character, when the lifting of the coquettish and vain cloud, which had usually surrounded her, allowed him an insight to the really good and amiable little heart beneath. He felt pleased, too, at her appreciation of his reading. *Chambers's Miscellany* afforded him many a pleasant hour. Occasionally he would now read to Bell either at home, or more rarely at Kin-Rhynie ; though many was the little disagreement over the merits of the book. Bell and Jessie preferred the tales and poetry, whilst John adored the travels, or lives of eminent men. Certain it was that Bell did not inform Rosie Gow of these studies, and equally certain was it that John began to think complacently of Bell's improvement under his tuition. For now he often told her his mind pretty freely ; and with his good advice, to say nothing of Jessie's companionship, the little damsel was beginning to be quiet and sensible. But not serious ! Oh no ! Her nature was light, airy, and

full of playful quickness, and shone to advantage alongside the more serious character of John Cameron, each setting off the qualities of the other by the contrast. Things prospered : Bell was very blithe and happy at the farm ; John's work progressed merrily ; the lovers Jessie and Allister were busy over the plans for their future home ; and finally, Widow Cameron rejoiced in a letter from her darling Donald, dated at sea, full of hope and good promise.

Wise heads began to nod when Bell did not join every dance and party about the village, excusing herself on account of Aunt Eppy's rheumatism. The farmer remarked that his bairn was getting less heedless and wilful, whilst John Cameron thought she grew prettier every day.

But a change was impending over all ; and John did not know how dangerously dear those evening chats were growing to him, nor how he should miss them, until they were for ever at an end.

CHAPTER X.

THE Laird and his wife left the "great house" for the south, and not long after all Dunerdie turned out, or rushed to windows and doors, to see Captain Angus make his first appearance, walking up the street followed by his great deer-hound Bran. Angus Gordon was a striking young man in appearance, and one who was *very nearly* a charming person. But he stopped short of the charming in looks, as he did in many other respects. He had been a spoiled boy ; when grown up, he entered the army, had served several years abroad and at home, and was now on leave for some months.

There was really little harm in him beyond an inordinate love of idle mischief, and a strong spice of pride. But he dearly loved the old Highland hills and all their sports ; he therefore was greatly

pleased at being his brother's representative in Dunerdie: he shot with Laurie, went visiting the tenants, and ere long his skill as a sportsman, his carefully arranged Highland dress, pleasant frank manner and address, won him golden opinions from all Dunerdie.

After a few weeks he wearied of his solitude, and made Allister Stuart his constant companion: they shot and went over the farms together, and Allister gave descriptions of all the country-folk, their habits and customs. Captain Angus wanted to be very popular, therefore he soon announced his intention of giving a splendid ball and supper in the Laird's great barn, to receive all the countryside. Allister and Laurie were charged with the invitations, and nothing was talked of or dreamed about but the "Captain's ball." One gossip might be heard affirming on undoubted authority that six sheep were to be killed for the occasion; a second declared that there were four Inverness fiddlers engaged; but on the important day, Rosie Gow saw with her own eyes the Captain superintending the

loading of a cart with flowers and boughs from the shrubberies, to decorate the ball-room, and rushed in to tell the news to Bell, in a state of frantic glee. She found Aunt Eppy grumbling and muttering to herself over the trimming of her new cap, and was greeted joyfully by the little body, who had a horror of solitude and silence. "Come awa in, Rosie, lass! an' sit in to the fire; yon fule bairn is no in, an' it five o' the clock."

"Whaur's she gane, o' a' nichts in the year when we've a' to look our best, an' dance wi' bonnie Captain Angus! I was thinkin' she'd maybe help me to plait up my hair the way she does her ain. An' ye say ye dinna ken where she is, auntie?" said Rosie in a provoked tone of voice.

"Ken! ay do I. Bell is clean daft wi' yon weary Camerons. Whenever John came in to tell her Jess wasna to be at the ball, she up an' off through the glen to see her. Rosie, do ye think really there's onything atwixt the bairn an' John? She aye laughs, an' says it wad be as easy to get hot water frae beneath cauld ice, as to see John

Cameron fash himsell for a lass ; but I canna settle my mind. There's Bell aye scornfu' to ilka ither lad, an' she'll listen to John,—ay ! an' mind what he says till her. The auld wife being sae sickly, Bell gaes up there to read wi' them, an' seems blither than a mavis when she comes hame after it. Yet, ye see, John never comes wi' her, nor does he crack wi' us at nights ; but I'll wager he kens the auld word, ' kindness creeps when it canna gang.' Sae I'se no be surprised gin he's mad for her a' the time ! Though it wad never do for her to fling hersell awa on sic a poor lad as yon."

" Oh," said Rosie, " ye needna be feared. She kens her ain worth ower weel, an' I hae reasons o' my ain to be sure that it's just nonsense. Ye maun mind, too, that Johnnie has been stayin' here, an' it's simple eneuch she should speak to him ; but let the lad gie her ae word against her fancy, my lady will be aff an' awa like a scared wild-duck."

Consoled by Rosie's positive assertions, Aunt Eppy resolved to think no more about Bell and

John, and redoubled her energies in the construction of the bows which were to set off her ample head-gear for the evening's festivities.

It was true that Bell had hastened to condole with Jessie, who was, poor lassie! really to be pitied; for much as Allister wished and begged her to go to the ball, and great as had been her delight in the anticipation of appearing with her betrothed among the folk of Dunerdie, her mother was so unwell and nervous that day, that Jessie could not think of leaving her with any of her neighbours.

Accordingly, she put away her best gown, and with a cheerful face gave her mammie a kiss, assuring her "she was better at hame after a', for wadna a' the lads an' lassies be teasin' her an' Allister? besides, he an' Johnnie wad tell her a' the news o' the ball."

Bell was sadly disappointed to hear all this, though not a little consoled by John's offering to escort her home, and by his engaging her for several reels.

Naturally enough, her visit to Kin-Rhynie was

short. The toilette causes as many thoughts and as much care to the country lass, with no ornament but her youth and good looks, as to the highborn lady with her lace and diamonds. Besides, as the lassie has everything to do for herself, whilst the lady has a maid to take all trouble off her hands, we may forgive Bell for hurrying down the glen as fast as she could, though John Cameron, all in his best, was by her side.

An hour later he sat in the farm kitchen, mentally chiding himself for the feelings which were busy at his heart ; for when once his quiet earnest disposition was wrought upon, it was more intense and passionate than many a more demonstrative one. Bell was really such a dear, coaxing little creature, with her dimples and smiles, that, living under the same roof with her as John had lately done, and being treated by her with such a marked difference from all others, we cannot blame him for beginning to think that an honest straightforward guide and friend would perfect the dawning excellence of her character. Without more vanity than

is inherent in every man, he sometimes brought himself to believe that he had the power to influence her. He had, however, no thoughts of becoming a suitor for Bell. She was rich, he was poor, and much too proud to dream of taking a wife who might be supposed superior to his own family. He positively started at Bell's appearance, as she came in with a lighted candle in one hand and her wrapping plaid over her other arm. She certainly looked lovely! The pleasure and excitement before her lent a richer colour to her cheek, and an additional brilliancy to her large clear eyes. She wore a light-coloured dress; no ornament, save some bright blue ribbons, in her hair, which was braided round her head in most becoming fashion.

"Aweel," said she, turning round on her heels before John, in whose countenance admiration was plainly legible, "will I do for a partner the nicht, Mr Cameron?"

"Oh, Bell," said the young man, "ye're far ower bonnie! Ye look like a fairy queen! I only am feared ye'll no care to be seen dancin' or speakin'

to a puir cottar lad like me ! though there winna be ane that thinks you as bonnie, or kens ye to be as gude, as I do. Beauty's a grand gift, Bell, an' you hae an orra share o't."

"John, it's little ye ken o' me, if that's your thocht. I'd rather dance wi' you, an' hear ye speak sae kindly, than I'd dance a' nicht wi' Dunerdie himsell ;" and Bell reached out a small hand for John to shake, which he seemed inclined to retain so long in his that she finished her speech with a saucy laugh. "Because it's sae few saft words or praises you gie us puir lasses. Ye're liker ane o' the cauld stanes ye chip and chisel, than a brisk lad that loes a hearty reel." I cannot say what answer she might have received, for whatever Johnnie meant to say was checked by Aunt Eppy, who rustled into the room in all the glories of new cap and black silk gown. The farm lads and the rest being summoned, the joyous party set off, leaving the farmer and the old henwife to keep the house. When they reached the scene of action, the sound of fiddles and pipes came cheerily through

the frosty air, and the numerous assemblage appeared merry enough. Our friends were late, and several reels had already been danced. The barn was gaily drest with flowers, berries, and plenty of lights. The Captain, gay with brooches, cairngorm buttons, elaborate kilt and hose, was doing his best to entertain his guests. He was astonished at Bell's good looks, never having seen her before ; and having soon found Allister, was then introduced to "Miss M'Pherson," as he persisted in calling her.

"Allister has kept the bonniest flower of the strath to the last," said he as he led Bell and her aunt to the best seat in the room, greatly to the disgust of several well-to-do farmers' wives, who thought "the lassie should hae kent her place better ; set *her* up for a lady, indeed ; what 'ill be next ?"

Angus Gordon was a desperate flirt in his own rank in life, and therefore he was all the more likely to charm a village maiden by his compliments and admiration. But Bell caught an earnest look from a certain manly dark eye at the other

side of the room ; and determining within herself that she would show John Cameron that all his counsel was not wasted, she replied civilly and briefly ; and after the dance was over, declined the Captain's offered arm, and retreated to her aunt's side. She was rewarded by a bright smile from John, with whom she danced next.

It might have been expected that the belle of the ball would have had more than enough of requests ; but a number of lads, provoked at the undisguised admiration of her two first partners, and not sorry to pay off old scores of contemptuous treatment from her, resolved to leave her seated ; and the consequence was, that ere long she began to hear among other females such remarks as—

“ Do ye see Bell there ! naebodys for her, and her lang-faced joe, Johnnie Cameron, is no dancin' muckle wi' her ? ”

“ Ou ay, did ye see how she snorted down the Captain just as she does a' her lads. She's a saucy quean.”

"Weel, then," said one, "she may whistle for a partner ; there's naeboddy heedin' her noo."

Bell's anger was roused by these remarks, and by the apparent indifference of John, who did not devote himself to her exclusively. Had she but fairly observed him, she would have seen that his eye was never off her. He was intently watching how long her good resolution and quiet behaviour would last. After a time she cast an appealing look at him, which ought to have brought him at once to her side ; but, alas ! Aunt Eppy's splendid cap was in the way, so it was of no effect. Captain Angus was sharp enough, and had talked sufficiently to Allister to be well aware of the real state of the case. Secretly nettled at his cool reception, he too had watched Bell, determined not again to be treated so cavalierly ; so, when he judged by the slight pout of the rosy lip and contraction of the delicate eyebrows, that the propitious moment had arrived, he again devoted himself to her, and soon drew her into as decided a flirtation as ever he had engaged in.

John kept aloof ; and the ball having ended very late, the Captain walked more than half-way home with his fair partner, whilst Aunt Eppy combated yawns and sleepiness in order not to lose a word of her pet's gay conversation.

John returned home very angry with himself for being put out, and arguing that it was but natural so young and pretty a girl should be pleased with such marked admiration from a handsome young gentleman, particularly as the Captain had treated her with a respectful courtesy very different from the bold manners of the village lads. But then poor John thought how often Bell had told him that his words and his advice were her guide ; and he recalled their many hours of friendly chat and intercourse with a sort of feeling that his happy days were over. He fancied, too, that Allister began to have his head turned by the young laird, who treated him completely as an equal ; yet when Jessie sought a full account of the ball next day, the straightforward John, who had slept off his vexation, omitted alluding in any way to the cause

of it ; and dwelling entirely on the bright side of the picture, told Jessie how pretty Bell had looked, and how handsome and hearty Captain Angus had been. By-and-by Allister arrived full of news, and exulting in the success of the ball. But I must record, as an honest historian, that Mr Stuart was very languid and weary, and that he soon extended himself on the settle at full length, ay, and fell asleep too. However, as he had not been in bed, and a night of reel-dancing, with the occasional glass of toddy to keep up the excitement, is apt to tell next day on both mind and body, it was not perhaps much to be wondered at. He told Jessie what healths had been drunk, and how Angus had given as his toast "Miss Bell M'Pherson and all the bonnie lassies of Dunerdie ;" and how much he (Allister) had missed his ain Jessie. So the affectionate girl thought him handsomer and more lovable than ever, as he dozed away half the morning at Kin-Rhynie.

CHAPTER XI.

AND what of Bell? She woke up late to a slight sense of remorse at the doings of the last night, and with a keen feeling of anxiety to know what John had thought of her conduct. Aunt Eppy was rapturous in her praise of the young laird's politeness; and the never-ceasing encomiums on his appearance and manners, in which the old lady indulged, somewhat provoked Bell, whose thoughts just now ran in an opposite current, and nearly caused a quarrel between them. Bell was dying to see John and Jessie, yet she was afraid of remonstrance from the former. Her impatience at length prevailed, and she fairly ran away from Aunt Eppy, who for the twentieth time was recapitulating to a neighbour, "An' dinna ye ken, he gied me a cup o' tea wi' his ain bonnie hand; an' he tellt me I had a look o' an

auld Lady Drumdaidle wha's sib to him. Eh me ! sic a dear young man as he is."

Bell soon appeared in Widow Cameron's tidy house ; she had of course to bear much good-natured bantering from Jessie on the distinction and honours with which she had been treated, but was allowed to tell her own tale to the widow, who liked to hear about the sayings and doings in the strath.

"I'll no deny the Captain's a bonnie lad," said Bell, "and a real gude dancer ; but I was vext at him keepin' sae muckle about me. I saw fine he had the wee drap toddy in his head, an' I wasna gaun to believe a' the fine things he said. He tellt me, though, that Allister was as gude as a brither to him, and the pleasantest company in the world. Do ye 'gree wi' that, Jessie? Eh, lass, but we wanted you yestreen."

Much more was said and chatted over, and Bell came to the conclusion that John had not seen anything wrong in her behaviour, but felt a pang of disappointment at thinking that he had not noticed her enough to remark it.

She left word for him to come to the farm next day to complete his work (which had been stopped because of a hard frost), and wearily took her way down the glen. Coming towards her she met John himself, and felt her heart give a bound at the sight.

"John, ye look terrible serious," said she; "an' though I haena a minute to stop, I was wantin' to ask what garr'd ye look sae dour an' glum yestreen, an' what took ye off sae sune?"

"I'm sure, Bell," answered he, "I didna ken that I looked dour, and I was there ower lang. I care little for reels when ance I hae danced wi' my ain friends. I'm neither a keen nor a gude dancer like ither folk, an' I'm best awa."

John looked sad, and Bell forgot all her vanity and pride, and conquering the rising feeling of reluctance to own herself wrong, she laid her hand on the young man's arm, and, speaking hurriedly, said, "Weel, then, I'm noo gaun to show you I'm a gude bairn, for I'll tak a scoldin' gin you gie't me, John

Cameron. I'm feared you thocht me wild an' foolish wi' the Captain, but 'deed it wasna my seek-in' ; an' what could I do ? But I'm sorry noo, for your sake. You'd thocht I was wiser for a' your teaching, and I've disappointed you, though ye say naething. I see it in your een ; it's the look Jessie has when she's waefu', an' winna speak."

John answered her with emotion. "Scold you for being thought the sweetest and bonniest lass o' our strath ! Wha could help thinkin' that, I would like to ken ? Maybe I was as far to blame as you, Bell. I thocht you didna care to dance or speak to me, though there's nane truer to you than me ; an' when ither fouk were speakin' ill-naturedly o' you, an' sayin' the Captain wasna steady, I said ne'er a word. But oh, lass, ye hae made me happy this day, an' I will ne'er misdout you again."

"Dinna," said Bell, looking up into his face ; "we're gude friends, an' as auntie says, 'Leal heart never lee'd.' I tell ye ance for a', that I'm sorry to vex you ; an' noo I'm gaun to rin hame, or my daddie will be wantin' his supper ; sae gang awa

hame, lad, and dinna be tellin' Jessie ugly tales o' the bonnie young gentleman."

Before John could stop her, the fleet-footed lassie had run half down the hill, and there she paused, and called out one more cheery "Gude-nicht, Johnnie!" which was responded to heartily, and in a few minutes she was at the door of her home.

When she walked in, she was in no small degree astonished at finding Captain Angus seated quite at home by the ingle-neuk, talking to her father of turnips and West Highland stirks with as much apparent zeal as if he had been bred a farmer.

Bell's race home had shaken down all her hair, which hung wildly over her face, as she stood there startled at the unexpected visitor.

"Pardon, Miss M'Pherson, for calling at so late an hour," said Angus, stepping forward to meet her with outstretched hand; "but hearing that your father liked a hare now and then, I gave myself the pleasure of bringing my day's sport (pointing to a heap of game in the corner), as I went home to my lonely dinner."

"Gudeness me, Bell," said Aunt Eppy from her corner, "where on airth got ye sae blawn about, an' siccan a red face? Rin awa, lass, an' sort yersell, an' we'll ask his honour to be sae kind as to taste wi' us. Rin awa, dawtie, noo, till I get a cheese an' a dram."

"Pray don't take so much trouble," said Angus. "I confess I am very hungry; but if Farmer M'Pherson would allow me to stay and have some of those excellent potatoes I see boiling for supper, it would be a real charity."

"Did ever ye hear the like?" quoth the delighted auntie, with a hearty pat on the young man's back to enforce her good-will.

"Charity—'od! it's an honour sic as we canna expeck. You're a real hearty gentleman, sir, an' we should surely gie our best to your father's son. Stay an' welcome, gin our puir place can warm ye, or our supper please ye," said the farmer, heartily shaking hands, and placing his guest in the elbow-chair. Angus did stay, and proved himself a "real hearty lad;" he managed to impress the farmer

and Aunt Eppy most favourably ; and though Bell was silent and quiet, he flattered himself that she listened attentively to his lively conversation.

Foolish Aunt Eppy ! she instantly built a castle in the air, and already saw Bell a real lady ; but she felt quite provoked with her niece's indifference, and secretly determined henceforth to keep John Cameron away as much as lay in her power.

Day followed day, and, on one pretence after another, Angus was constantly to be found at the farm ; and Bell, after withstanding his attentions for a while, began insensibly to grow pleased at the jokes and knowing smiles of her old aunt, and to think that if it rested but with her to confirm the impression which every one said she had made on the Captain's heart, it would be the height of happiness ; and the foolish girl fairly avoided the Camerons and most of her village friends, and sat indulging in day-dreams over her spinning-wheel.

Angus sketched cleverly, and had insisted on taking her picture ; and Aunt Eppy's exultation was at its height. John had been down as usual, and

at first thought that the lassie would keep to her word, and that the Captain's idle fancy would pass away. But finding this was not the case, wounded by her coolness, vexed with himself for having thought so much of Bell, and altogether wretched, though too proud to show his feelings, he rarely left home, and kept his heavy heart and disappointed feelings to himself.

The young Captain and Allister were still inseparable ; but it so happened that Angus had never seen Jessie. He was very much inclined to dislike the Camerons, on account of Donald's achievements and adventures, and for all the trouble John's influence with Bell had caused him. When a person hears a family cried up as patterns of goodness, he often ends in thinking the unknown paragons very tiresome ; and Angus was, above all, provoked at Allister's engagement to one of his aversions, the Camerons.

Allister—who, by the by, was becoming very smart, and copied Angus in dress and manner as much as lay in his power—had often praised Jessie

to his friend. Accordingly, one day when out shooting, Angus suddenly turned over the hill to Kin-Rhynie, and declared to Allister he must go and see the boasted beauty who was going to make him commit the folly of matrimony. It happened that the widow had been poorly of late, and Jessie had sat up a good deal with her, and besides had a bad cold and a swelled face, so that when she opened the door, her eyes red and dim, her hair hidden under a close cap, and her whole appearance dull and languid, Angus made an expressive grimace at Allister, who, in his turn, looked red and uncomfortable, and would fain have been miles away. Jessie was quick and hospitable as usual, and never for an instant imagining that her looks could influence Allister in any way, was enchanted to see his intimacy with Angus, who treated him so like his equal. The widow thought it but right of Allister to introduce his true love, and jokingly attacked him for having been "sae lang in bringin' the laird to see his bride." Angus could not help admiring the tender affection which seemed to reign

in the cottage, nor the devoted care which was visible in every action of Jessie's towards her mother. But he thought Allister was going to throw himself away, and preserved an ominous silence when they went on again, which made his companion feel thoroughly uncomfortable.

It would be needless to follow every step of the companionship of Angus with young Stuart; suffice it to say, that although he teased him, and laughed at his sweetheart's looks, yet he had not tried to induce him to break his engagement; and although Jessie saw Allister less often, she was still happy and confiding, and would gaze on the site of her future home with a gay and light heart.

Allister liked her well, but did rather regret she was so quiet and homely in her ways, and occasionally admitted to Angus "that he *was* perhaps too young to marry."

CHAPTER XII.

ONE day in the beginning of December, Farmer M'Pherson returned home from market in an evidently perturbed frame of mind. He spoke sharply to the lad who came for his pony, banged the house-door, and ordered Bell off to her own room, as he wished to speak to his sister. Scarcely had she left the room when he approached Aunt Eppy, and in a voice of suppressed passion began :—

“I’ve heard in market the day things said o’ the ongauns o’ this house, that I wadna hae heard said for fifty pounds; and I’m feared but it’s greatly your faut, ye misguided auld fule! When I brocht ye to my couthie dwellin’, an’ gied ye the best I had, wasna a’ the return I asked kindness an’ care o’ my mitherless wee lassie? And what return gat

I? To hear my bairn's gude name taen awa by a' the carles in the market—the young anes sayin' she was 'ower proud to come to an honest lad's fireside, the auld grey heads sorrowin' that sae bonnie a maiden should come to siccan a pass. Old woman, I command ye to speak the truth, an' say what has been a' this wark wi' our young laird."

The sturdy farmer trembled with anxiety as he grasped his sister's shoulder, and waited her reply.

"Set ye up for an auld fule yoursell," indignantly retorted Aunt Eppy. "Whaur was your spirit no to gie them the lee, an' stand up for your ain flesh an' bluid? Siccan a pass! My certy! when our lassie is bride to the Laird's ain brither, an' walks down the kirk in her silk goon an' her feathered bonnet, we'll hear a' the strath singin' to anither tune!"

"Eppy M'Pherson," said the farmer, "never let me hear sic misguided nonsense again. Gin the lad were a chief or a lord, an' sought my bairn, I wad say to him, 'Gang your ways; ne'er dochter o'

mine shall be married oot o' her degree, to be hadden down an' sniffed at by a' her husband's friends. Let her bide a lassie, or mate wi' ane o' her ain degree.' And I wad fain ken hoo ye come to think Captain Angus is like to ask her?"

"Doesna he aye watch for her whaurever she gaes; doesna he come day after day to see her; doesna he tak her an' me in his braw dog-cart to save us spoilin' our shoon i' the glaur; and isna he aye speakin' saftly to her, an' tellin' her she's bonnier than the flowers o' May? Ca' ye that naething?" said the old woman, triumphantly.

The farmer wrung his hands, and continued, bitterly: "Waur than I thocht—waur than I thocht. An' whan were a' thae fine doings? Whatfor do I hear o' them the noo for the first time? Ochone, sister! but ye've brocht ill to this house. Did ye ne'er see a wily tod after a playsome lambie? At your years no to ken that the lad's just foolin' her an' you! God grant my bairn haena to dree a broken heart, for it 'ill be at my door. I aye keepit my books, an' minded

my farm an' my business, but little thocht had I what was doing in my house."

"Weel, weel, man, weddin' an' hangin' aye gang by destiny ! an' I seena that a bonnie face an' genty lass like Bell shouldna be a match for a king gin he likit !"

"I bid ye ne'er say that again, or I'll turn ye frae the door. An' noo a' that's left us is to save the bairn frae waur ill yet."

The farmer fetched his daughter and spoke to her very seriously, telling her that her intimacy with Angus had injured her in the eyes of all the neighbourhood, and setting forth the folly and evil of it to herself. Bell had never seen her father so angry or agitated ; she was frightened, ashamed, and distressed. She could only assure him that she would break off with the Captain, and then began to weep most piteously. The farmer desired her to get ready at once for a long visit to her sister, whilst he secured a conveyance in which to drive her there. Left alone, Bell bolted her door, and sobbed as if her heart would break ; for to be lightly

spoken of, and looked coldly on, was inexpressibly bitter to her pride.

She reflected how, step by step, she had gone on; how Angus had exclusively devoted himself to her, and how flattered she had felt by his praises. When she thought over the past, it seemed no wonder that all this had attracted observation. She remembered, too, that the very last Sabbath the Camerons had walked home hurriedly without speaking to her as usual. Was that to avoid her! Had she incurred their displeasure from her idle vanity? for she did not really care for the Captain. Wounded pride struggled for a while in her bosom, but remorse and shame got the mastery; and in her ebullition of penitence, Angus appeared to her a frightful monster luring her on to destruction. It was doubly mortifying, too, that she had so often spoken to John Cameron about her strength of mind and good resolutions. Full of such thoughts as these, her drive with the irate farmer to her sister's was very awful: he lectured her all the way on her misdemeanours. She had been brought from

home without a sight of her Aunt Eppy to console her ; and when they arrived at their journey's end, late and tired, her father spoke of her to his eldest daughter more harshly than Bell had ever been spoken of by him in her life before.

The kind sensible Katie saw that her young sister was thoroughly miserable, and exerted herself to the utmost in shielding her from all these reproaches and hard words, promising her father to do her best in eradicating Aunt Eppy's foolish doctrines from Bell's mind.

On his return home, the old man sought Angus, and firmly but respectfully requested him to cease his visits to the farm, giving his reasons in a straightforward and simple manner. The young Captain assured him of his regret that any ill-natured reports should have been circulated about him and Bell, and promised never to seek her again during his stay at Dunerdie. This did not prevent his riding about the neighbourhood of the farm in hopes of a chance-meeting with the lassie ; finding, however, that Aunt Eppy was the

only person to be seen, he gave up his researches, and made more demands on Allister's time than ever. He wanted amusement, and was beginning to have had enough of the lonely great house of Dunerdie.

Jessie Cameron suspected John's depression and melancholy to be connected with Bell M'Pherson, but as he maintained a strict reserve on the subject, she did not venture to ask him. Both she and her mother had felt sadly grieved at the numerous ill-natured stories about the lassie. Blaming the Captain more than any one, they yet admitted Aunt Eppy's gossiping folly to have been the root of the evil.

The first disagreement between Jessie and her lover arose from this subject, for she could not resist saying what she thought of Angus's total disregard of the opinion of the neighbours, and the evil consequence to Bell of his devotion and admiration.

She thought him selfish and unkind—"For," she said, "ye ken weel eneuch, ance oot o' Dunerdie, an' her bonnie face 'ill no keep in his thochts ae single

hour ; for his ain idle fancy, how can he tell he may-na hae gien her a heartache for life ? When he's awa, we a' ken richt weel the ill-will an' crabbitness o' the tounsfolk 'ill fa' on puir Bell. I tell ye ance for a', Allister, let him be gentle or simple, there's nae mair cruel deed in a lad than to make a lass believe he cares for her, an' gar ither folk think it ana', an' then be aff an' awa like a knotless thread. For my part, I think the Captain's no acted honestly ava."

"Tuts, nonsense, ye silly gowk ; wha could think a real gentleman cared for an ignorant lassie like Bell ? She met him half-way wi' her airs an' set-up looks ; she was aye puttin' herself in his gate, and whatfor shouldna he amuse himsell ? It was nae faut o' his gin M'Pherson allowed him to be there at a' times," replied Allister, pettishly.

Somehow Angus discovered Jessie's opinion of him, which did not diminish his dislike to the Cameron family. Owing to the Captain's frequent remarks, Allister sometimes began to own to himself that Jessie was not so great a match as he deserved ;

but yet he never spent an hour in her company without feeling the insensible charm of her true and open disposition ; and he would have been more than man to withstand the blind devotion with which she treasured his every look and word.

CHAPTER XIII.

BUT how was Bell progressing meanwhile at her sister's quiet home? At times weary and dejected, at others more gay and hopeful, she had begun discussing matters with Katie in their sisterly conversations. Her time was often passed in laying out plans for the future, far more earnest and useful than her previous butterfly existence.

I must confess she occasionally thought her life dull, and gave a few sighs to the memory of the farm-kitchen with its merry parties. The Captain was regretted a little, and John was often thought of, but on the whole she did not wish to return home.

The Kin-Rhynie people inquired eagerly for Bell on all occasions, being anxious to get tidings of her; and as they stood in need of a sack of meal, Jessie

advised her brother to get it from Cumming's mill. She was much amused at the excellent excuses John found for acting upon her suggestion immediately ; and when he started on his expedition, it was with a mischievous glance and a merry laugh that she bade him "gude speed an' gude luck." He took care not to inquire her meaning, and followed the track over the hill in spite of cold wind and heavy snow-showers. The walk of ten miles was a rough one, but in a few hours he came to the mill, where a hearty welcome from Katie, and a somewhat shy reception from Bell, repaid him for his journey. Bell was quiet, perhaps dreading serious words of reproof from John if he dared give them utterance ; the timid silent lassie, who sat with Katie's sturdy boy on her knee, was so unlike the saucy coquette of Dunerdie that John could scarce believe his eyes.

He watched her narrowly, and saw her shrink at the merest allusion to the village or its news ; then by degrees she ventured to inquire for his mother and Jessie, stealing a hurried glance at him, to see if he looked as though their old friendship were

forgotten. She avoided all conversation with him, and pretended various household duties as an excuse for never leaving Katie's side.

When Katie praised her behaviour since she had been at the mill, John forgot how he had declared her a heedless hizzie, and had promised himself never to speak to her again : he now only lamented that so sweet a disposition should have been left to the spoiling of Aunt Eppy !

Later in the afternoon Katie's gudeman came in, insisting on John's staying at least over the next day with them, declaring that the meal was not quite ready. So John did stay, passing the day dangerously for his peace of mind. Before long he and Bell began to chat in their old friendly style—she lamenting her errors, and wishing she aye had Katie to advise her, so good and kind as she was to her ; he gazing at her, till any eyes but his could see at a glance how the case stood. The day happened to be snowy, so there was an excuse for remaining indoors ; and before eventide Bell suspected that, in spite of all bygones, John was attached to

her more sincerely and ardently than e'er a suitor she had had in her life.

Triumph filled her head, not to say heart. It is a melancholy fact, but, to be honest, we must record it, that no sooner did she see her quondam censor, John Cameron, quite in her power, than a lingering spark of coquetry appeared. She smiled graciously on him, but owned to herself—"Eh, me! though I do like to be courted an' admired, an' John's a good lad eneuch, what wad I do gin I were married like Katie? Pity me! gin I'd to bide at hame an' rock a cradle, or mak claes to my gude-man an' bairns! Na, na! I maunna think o't, unless it were to be a grand lady." John, however, ignorant of all that was passing in that unsteady little head, passed a charming day, and, full of his own happy thoughts, strolled out at dusk in the bright clear moonlit air, leaving Bell alone in the kitchen, when her brother-in-law put his head in at the door, and tossed her a small parcel from home, which he said had just come by a neighbour's cart from Dunerdie. Alas! in that unlucky parcel was a

letter which acted on Bell like a spark on a mine of gunpowder. It was from Aunt Eppy ; and I shall give the sense, though I dare not meddle with the old lady's orthography, which was curious enough in its way. It ran thus :

“ MY AIN SWEET BIRDIE,—I hae wanted to write ye for days, but your father is grown sae grim an' sae dour, I couldna get leave. Gif Willie Gow hadna happened in when I was my lane, you micht hae wanted thir lines in vain. Eh, bairn ! I canna keep frae sayin' the Captain is clean mad at your bidin' awa. He bade me get word to ye, that gin he saw ye ance mair, to get your pardon for the trouble he's caused you, he wad leave Dunerdie wi' a quiet heart, an' he'd ask nae mair. Forby, he wussed ye wad come to the dance at Bob Fraser's, Thursday first, till he'd get speech o' ye. See gin ye can do't, for fouk winna be speakin' o' ye half sae muckle when ye're to the fore in your ain place, as awa in disgrace like an ill-willy bairn. I hope ye hae ower muckle

speerit to thole being keepit doun. Dinna be mindin' John Cameron ; he's no a friend to ye ; the Captain kens brawly that he's in covenant wi' Katie an' your father again' ye ; an' ithers sangs to the same tune he tellt me. Come awa, then, hame to your auntie an' weel-wishers, but dinna say ony word o' the dance. I'll manage yon for ye.—From your loving auntie, E. M'PHERSON.

“ Captain Angus says he has something maist particular about the Kin-Rhynie fouk to tell ye. He said, too, the sun hadna shined since ye left ; but I jalouse 'tis a bonnie way o' speakin', for the road is a' muddy wi' the meltin' snaw, an' the sun shines bricht even noo.”

Such was the missive which gave quite a new current to Bell's ideas when she received it. She resolved to coax Katie to take her home for a day or two ; and as for Angus—well, she would like to know what he had to say so very particular. She felt excessively aggrieved at the idea of John Cameron being in a plot against her. What in the world had he ven-

tured to say prejudicial to her? She began by not believing it to be the case, and ended by dwelling on the thought till she felt angry. Carelessly asking him whether there were going to be any dances in the strath, and receiving an answer in the negative, she looked upon it as a proof of his complicity in the scheme for banishing her, not only from Bob Fraser's ball, but from her home and Aunt Eppy. So the young damsel went to bed angry and cross, turning over all feasible pretexts for a return to Dunerdie the next day.

CHAPTER XIV.

COMFORTABLE and neatly arranged was the warm kitchen in which they sat, and smoking hot was the porridge on which the Cummings and their guests were breakfasting the following morning. Katie's pleasant face was bending over her boy, rosy and fresh from sleep, when Bell suddenly went up to her, and interrupted her play with the child, by saying, "Katie, dear, I'd fain win hame the day for ae look at our father, an' to get some warm claes to me, now the snaw's come. Ye'll gang wi' me like a kind body?"

"Are ye mad, lass?" interrupted Cumming, laughing. "The hill's white wi' snaw, an' the road heavy wi' slush! And when a's dune, what'st for? Twa days sin', ye were for bidin' here till the spring, an' now ye're wantin' hame, like a silly bairn that doesna ken when it's weel aff."

"Gin ye dinna like the snaw, canna I get wi' Willie Gow on his cart, to see my father, an' get my winsey goon?"

"Say nae mair, dearie," said Katie: "father's tellt us we're no to let ye oot o' this till he sends; sae dinna worry yersell, but be thankfu' we can be canty thegither here."

Bell made no answer; her plan was made at that moment. The table being cleared, she found John by her side, and nobody else there. He began, "Micht I speer, Bell, what's the reason ye want hame? Is there onything Jess or I could do? Bide here, like a dear wiselike lassie, an' it's blithe we'll be to come an' gang for you ony time."

"I dinna dout it," said Bell; "you're aye thochtfu', John. I hae gotten my answer frae Katie about bidin', sae I'se e'en be patient."

"I'm to gang awa the day mysell," said John, "an' muckle as I wad hae likit to leave it unsaid, I canna langer keep my tongue frae tellin' what gars my heart beat wildly. When first I saw ye, Bell, I needed nae second thocht to own that ye were

bonnie. Then, though I had nae hope o' yer favour, and was never thinkin' sae muckle as that I wad get even a kind look frae you, ye ken yoursell ye socht me ; ye spak to me kindly ; ye were gude to my mither an' to me. Yet for a' that I dauredna hope. Then cam the cloud ; ithers blamed ye, but I lamented for ye. Noo that ye've kent what the warld's spite is, ye'll maybe no scorn an honest lad that has a heart for nane else but you. Never hae I loed afore, an' though ye were parted frae me now for a'thegither, to my deein' day ye'd be the only ane I ever wad gie up a' for. Ay ! mair than my heart's bluid I wad gie, gin ye asked it o' me." John's words came from his very heart ; he grew pale as death with the emotion which thrilled through him as he spoke.

He felt that on Bell's answer depended the whole fate of his future life ; and yet there she stood, rolling her apron up between her fingers, and giving no sign of attention, save that her breath came quick and short. A whirl of thoughts filled her head, for John's abrupt declaration took her by surprise. A

strange feeling of joy at having won his heart, wonder at his boldness in thus wooing the beauty of Dunerdie, and a secret inclination to cry with happiness, mingled with astonishment at John's plain, manly speech, so different from Captain Angus's high-flown compliments. Suddenly Aunt Eppy's warnings came upon her. Had John really plotted to keep her away from home and the Captain's society? and was this visit and confession pre-arranged and abetted by Katie and her father? If John thought he was to get her so easily, without suspense or trouble, it was time to give him a lesson. She said after a while, "Weel then, since I'm no askin' for your heart's bluid, will ye gie me an answer to a plain question? Were you speakin' to Katie or my father about me? an' are ye ane o' them that keeps me here, awa frae hame? If no, will ye take me back to my father's house, as I wish, the day, or gie me a reason whatfor no?"

John looked grave and sadly anxious, but answered unhesitatingly, "Ay, Bell, I hae spoken to baith your father an' sister, for they askit

me what I thocht o' a' the clashes about ye ; but oh ! dear lassie ! dinna ask me to tak ye hame, for I wad cut aff my hand before I'd do't. Ye had best bide whaur ye are ; folk 'ill a' think weel o' a dochter that kens hoo to 'gree to her father an' friends' advice. But oh ! dinna look sae scornfu' as ye're doing : I hae tellt my love for ye ; an' bonnie though ye be, an honest lad's heart is no a thing to laugh an' jeer about. Gif I had rank an' siller baith, I wad lay them down for your sake ; an' puir though I may be noo, I'll win baith gowd an' gude name for ye, Bell !"

" Dinna fash yoursell for me, Maister Cameron," said Bell, quite in a pet. " I'm obleeged to ye for yer gude opinion, though I think ye micht keep to the truth, an' no be sayin' I socht ye. I'm sure ony little kindness I had for ye was just my natural duty in my father's house, forby that Jessie is my friend ; but what ye mean by speakin' about clouds an' world's spite, is clean abune my understanding. An' if for my likin' a real gentleman to dance wi' me, a' the country lads are to drum gude manners

into me, I'll thank ye no to be the first. An' sae gude-day to ye, bonnie sir ;" and Bell tossed her head as she skipped away from her disconsolate lover, secretly hoping he would not believe her to be in earnest, but that he would repeat his declaration of love, and then she might be a trifle more gracious.

She little knew John Cameron. He listened spell-bound to her flighty speech, for one instant hid his face in his hands, and then, taking a long breath as if to remove some oppressive feeling, he quietly and sadly left the cottage, all his bright dreams gone, and much of his love for Bell turned to pity—not to call it contempt—which her heartless conduct well deserved.

He went about his work with Cumming, resolved to bury his sorrow and love for ever in his own sad heart.

Bell repented her words the minute they were spoken, but confidently relied on being able to bring him back by a smile, and confession of her folly. She determined to prove to them all that

she was neither a baby nor a submissive child. She would go home, see Angus once more, and—yes, in her father's hearing—she would tell him she cared nothing for him or for his fine speeches. Then she would begin a new life of steady usefulness ; and as for John Cameron — oh, there was plenty time for settling *that* question. Thus ran Bell's thoughts, but now she busied herself with her cherished plan, and prepared for its immediate execution.

Some three or four hours after this the men came in, and Katie asked her husband to call Bell from the neighbouring cottage, where on most mornings she went to spin at the old wife's wheel.

" See to the fire, gudewife," said he, " for the day's turned most terrible cauld, and the wind drives through a body's banes."

" John, lad," said Katie, " ye'll ne'er get ower the hill this mornin' ; the snaw has come on again, and the tops are black wi' mist. I hope there's naebody oot there, for it's just terrible weather ; the drifts on Corry Kenachy 'ill be maist awful. I wish the gudeman wad bring Bell in, for it's wearing on late."

John assented to all Katie's remarks, and prepared himself with a weary and aching heart to meet Bell with the indifference which he felt her behaviour to him merited ; but just then Cumming hastened into the house with an anxious, fluttered look, and said—

“ Kate, hinny, Bell left old Meg's for the ploughman's shieling farther down the glen, and I've been there, and the wife says she left there about eleven wi' her plaid round her, and that the wee callant saw her tak the hill-road to Dunerdie.”

“ To Dunerdie, the bad bairn ! ” said Katie ; and then suddenly remembering the snow and the rough weather, she screamed in terror, “ And the hill, the hill ! Oh, she'll be lost and smoored i' the snaw, my bonnie wee Bell ! Oh, what will we do ? Oh, wae's me ! ”

“ The hill's an unchancy place enech to them that kens ilka step o' the road,” said Cumming ; “ an' the puir demented bairn's been ower but twice. Kate, we maun see an' save her gin nicht comes. John, what gars ye look sae scaured ? Dinna

frichten yersell, gudewife ; I've saved a sheep on a waur nicht than this, an' John here 'ill help ; but it 'ill be nae éasy job gin she's strayed. Hurry, lad ; we maun be gettin' ready : warm plaids, an' a bottle o' spirits, an' stout staffs to help us through, an' the byre lanthorns. Come awa ! we maunna lose time."

In the shortest possible space of time, leaving the weeping Katie to pray for their success, and far more anxious than they would confess, Cumming and John started on their search. The day had become extremely cold, and the snow fell in thin flakes on the low sheltered land around the mill, whilst the hills were quite hidden in dark snow-clouds. The previous day's snow was fine and dry ; it blew up around them as they ascended the face of the hill. Now we must turn to Bell, the unhappy cause of this anxiety.

After leaving John she had determined to run off home, trusting in her knowledge of the road to reach Dunerdie in three or four hours. The path was beaten ; people had passed over it yesterday,

and the footmarks in the snow would facilitate her progress. At all events she would try, and turn back if she found herself at fault ; and as she climbed gaily up the hill-side, she laughed to think of John's and Katie's serious faces when they missed her. After the first hill, the track lay over a peat-moss, bleak and bare, then wound through gullies and turns between the higher hills, till finally it came out on the brow of the mountain which backed Dunerdie.

When Bell came to the moss, the snow began to fall slightly ; but fancying that a treacherous morsel of blue sky betokened a clearing shower, she took her way along from moss-hag to moss-hag, singing to herself scraps of reel-tunes and other merry airs, and never heeding the black storm gathering round, nor the drifting wind which blew the snow along her path. She went on secure in her fancied knowledge of the road, though now the fresh-fallen snow had hidden every trace of a path ; but there was a certain rock of a peculiar shape which she looked to as a sure landmark, and it

loomed through the mist before her as she began to near the entrance of the first gully. It had become extremely cold, though the wind was at her back, and Bell could see the whirling wind curling up the light snow as she reached the Red Crag. Once arrived there, she paused to consider : a feeling of terror for the first time struck her heart, as she turned and looked upon the snowy prospect : she began to think that she had done a foolish thing, and had better turn homewards as quickly as she could. For the snow now fell in thick flakes which darkened the air, and both the hill and the way she had come were hid from her sight by the dense white veil.

She resolved to wait a little under the shelter of the crag, and when rested she would take advantage of the first break in the clouds and return. Her thoughts were none of the most agreeable as she leant against the rock wrapped in her plaid ; for now that she seriously reflected on her behaviour to John, she felt that she had acted unkindly and wrongly in every way. Resolutions of what she would do to

regain John's esteem occupied her mind, nor did she move till a violent driving gust sent the snow full in her face, and dashed it up the side of the crag. She looked out from her shelter, and to her dismay saw a wreath of snow blowing up like a high wall before her.

At once, thoughts of people lost in snow-drifts, and many fireside tales of a similar character, came to her mind ; and a feeling of horror, which she vainly tried to still, took possession of her whole frame. She screamed for help, and heard but the moaning wind reply. Tightening her plaid round her, she at length took the desperate resolve of braving the storm, and plunged into the drift of soft snow up to her knees. Struggling, toiling, she succeeded in getting through it, and with many an anxious look at the dark sky she contrived to make a little more progress. Alas ! there was still the moss to cross ere she regained any track to guide her ; and slipping into holes, plunging through deep drifts, and battling with the snow and wind, caused her to find this portion of her journey inexpressibly

difficult. The time sped on, and though it seemed to her that she had gone many miles, still she was on that dreary moss ; and every instant the drifts were deepening, and, poor lassie ! her strength and courage were failing. Feelings of giddiness came over her ; still she fought against them, and tried to get onwards. More than once she fell, and the cold and violent exertion were quickly overpowering her. The afternoon was closing in, and still the storm raged. Poor unhappy Bell ! she began to give herself up for lost ; and when she fell down exhausted into the drift, dark motes danced before her eyes, and she scarce felt the pain of a sharp blow which she gave herself by falling on a jagged stone. She still retained enough of consciousness, however, to rejoice as she slowly rose again, for she heard the sound of the tiny burn which ran through the moss, though it was nearly choked up by the snow. She had fallen on the stones near its margin, and thought she would be able to trace its course downwards, and thus reach the track. This ray of hope gave her new life. Cold, fatigue, and exhaus-

tion, however, were too much for her ; and, staggering and weak, she was only able to seek the most sheltered side of a rock which was still above the snow, and there sink down to die.

“My father little wots whaur he’ll find his wee Bell,” mentally ejaculated she ; “and Katie, too, may weary ere she sees her puir sister. An’ isn’t awfu’ to dee through a body’s ain act o’ sinfu’ disobedience ! Oh, John Cameron, an’ a’ kind friends, what garr’d me set mysell again’ your advice ? Wae’s me ! to dee here my lane wi’ a’ my sins on my head ! It’s an awfu’ death ! I maun say my prayers afore it’s ower late. But, oh ! I canna mind onything ; an’ a’ thing’s growin’ dark, dark, an’ cauld !”

Bell closed her eyes more than half unconscious, and the snow blew round her rocky bed, whilst the paralysing cold seized her every limb.

CHAPTER XV.

WHO may describe the agony of John Cameron, as he and Cumming vainly searched along the sides of the now obliterated track? The latter shook his head and pointed to the driving storm, and neither of them could comfort the other. They had with difficulty got as far as the Red Crag, and seeing the depth of the snow in the gully beyond, Cumming said to Cameron, "It's nae use gaun on; we canna get through the glen. God only can save the puir bairn gin she's ventured it, but I canna think she has got sae far. What gars ye luik sae frichtit?" said he, as Cameron sprang to the crag, where in the snow appeared a tiny blue speck. "Preserve us!" he went on, "it's the wee hankecher she wears on her throat; she's been by, this way, never fear."

"Yes," said John ; "but see ! here's a fit-mark that's no been covered by drift ; an' she has turned here. God be praised ; by His blessin' we'll find her yet !"

In vain they searched, bravely battling with the storm. So long as the semblance of a footprint inspired them with a gleam of hope, they continued their exertions, and when poor Bell ceased her painful wanderings and sunk down, were still anxiously persisting in their almost hopeless task.

About this time the snow ceased falling, and one by one the stars peeped brightly out as the frost grew keener. The men now separated, and each with a lanthorn searched the moss in different directions ; and just at the edge of the burn, as he strained his eyes in the dim light, John fancied he saw a dark heap half covered by drift. Could that be Bell ? To hasten towards it as fast as the snow would permit ; to feel hope brighten into certainty as he neared the object and distinguished the well-known plaid, whose red checks caught the lanthorn's light ; to throw himself on his knees by the girl's

side—all was but the work of a few minutes. There she lay, white and motionless as a marble image, the golden hair tangled and dank with the snow; the sweet fair face cold and pinched as with mingled terror and pain. He thought she was dead, and all his wrongs faded away, and gave place to the one thought that to hear those lips speak again, even to repeat the bitter words which had sunk into his heart, he would lay down his life. He took her ice-cold hand, and felt the pulse with a speechless terror lest his fears should prove true. But, oh! joy of joys! faint and feeble though its beat might be, there was yet life. He shouted loudly to Cumming, and began to raise the poor girl's stiff form from the snow; he poured a few drops from his flask between her lips, rubbed her hands with spirits, wrapping her in his own warm heavy plaid; and, supporting her in his arms, watched her with intense anxiety. Cumming joined him, and assisted in chafing her hands and feet; at last they had the inexpressible joy of feeling warmth return and the pulse increase in power; then John

gently raised her in his strong arms, avoiding all offers of help from his companion, and they commenced their journey homewards, often pausing to see that Bell was warm, and eagerly watching for any sign of returning consciousness. John carried her tenderly, carefully wrapping the plaid close around her. As they neared the farm, Katie rushed out to meet them, too thankful to see them bring her at all to stay and ask questions ; and hurried back before them to be ready with warm blankets and other comforts for her poor rescued sister. Just as they got into the kitchen, and John was about to relinquish his precious burthen, she opened her eyes, gazed up in his face, and with a sigh again became insensible. That look repaid John for much past misery ; but yet he waited anxiously through the night for Mrs Cumming's reports of her sister's condition. She came to herself, feeling miserably weak, ill with giddiness and cramps, and seemingly incapable of speaking. After getting her to take a little hot tea, Katie at length had the satisfaction of seeing her fall asleep ; so she shaded the

candle, gently placed a chair beside the bed, and there took up her station, an anxious but hopeful midnight watcher.

It was late in the day when Bell awoke to see Katie at work by her bedside, and to be embraced by her like a restored treasure. She made her sister tell all about the search for her, and in turn related her own tale, with much repentance and sorrow for her disobedient attempt to return home. She insisted on rising, and when she entered the kitchen leaning on Katie's arm, looked eagerly round for somebody or something she expected to see. Cumming came in by-and-by, and as he kindly accosted his sister-in-law, she ventured to ask him if she wasn't very heavy to carry down yon hill.

"Ye may be weighty for a' I ken," said he, "but John carried you every inch o' the road; an' ye may thank him, next to Providence, that ye didna dee like a smoored lamb in the snaw. He aye keepit me up wi' his gude sense and his perseverance; an' gin we hadna been ower anxious to be makin' jokes, I'd hae gien him a gude laugh at the daftlike gate he

floundered in the snaw after yon bit blue hankecher o' yours. Ay, my lass, you maun be thankfu' to John, I can tell you ; for the nicht was that bad after we got ye hame, you wad hae been buried deep eneuch afore we could hae got till ye. But we're a' richt, sae dinna be grewin' that gate." For Bell grew pale, and shuddered at the recollection of the last night's horrors.

"And will John no let me thank him the day?" said Bell, "or is he fairly tired oot an' sleepin'?"

"Hoot, toot, na ; he's awa hame hours ago. He just heard from Katie there that ye sleepit quiet, an' he gaed awa with his meal-bags on Gow's cart. Fine wark the auld grey mare 'ill hae to pu' through the snaw—but Johnnie wadna bide."

Bell was woefully disappointed, for she had intended saying much in her gratitude to John Cameron ; but she had leisure to think over it, for she was too weak and languid to move about or work. Shiverings and sudden flushes of heat came on ; she began to feel very weary and ill ; and before midnight, was in a high fever.

Many days passed ere she was sufficiently recovered to see any one. Her father and Aunt Eppy had been sent for, and they had assisted in sitting up and nursing her through her illness ; but the doctor strictly forbade all excitement and talking, and therefore she was left to the care of the judicious Katie. She still lay on her bed in the inner room, and was dreamily looking at the fire, when a soft and gladsome voice addressed her, and she felt the gentle kiss given her by Jessie Cameron, who sat down by her bedside, and, tenderly taking her white thin hand, said—

“ I hae wearied for this day, Bell darling, but the doctor wadna let me come till ye were fit for haein’ a crack an’ hearin’ news. He said he kent hoo it wad be when twa lassies got thegither after bein’ sundered a haill month.”

“ Tell me about Dunerdie, an’ a’ that’s gane an’ come, an’ I’ll listen to ye, an’ lie quiet,” said Bell, eagerly. “ I’m strong eneuch noo, really and truly,” she added ; and Jessie began to tell her first about her mother, who was still poorly and kept the house ;

then that the foundations of Birken Brae (Allister's house) had been laid ; that Allister was a greater favourite with the Laird than ever, and Captain Angus had given him such a grand set of ornaments for his Highland dress ; and that he had a Gordon tartan kilt, "just as braw as the laird's ain," only that Allister looked far bonnier than the laird ever did. And Jessie sighed as she told how this dear Allister was soon going to Ayrshire ; and now that Johnnie was away, she would indeed be lonely at Kin-Rhynie.

Bell started as she asked in a seemingly careless manner, " Johnnie will no be gaun for lang, I'm thinkin' ; isna he to big Birken Brae farm ?"

" He was surely to hae dune that, but he got a better job frae the master he worked wi' afore. He got him wark at the briggs in the new railroad they are makin' some gate 'bout Perth ; an' sae John took leave o' us muckle again' our will, and sair to our mither's sorrow, an' he says he'll bide awa a year or twa. Troth, he doesna seem to want to bide in Dun-erdie again ; but I'll be awa noo, for you're tired, I

see," said Jessie, as Bell turned her face to the wall. "Katie tellt me no to bide lang at ae time," and she quitted the room gently.

Bell wept, she scarce knew why ; she felt very sad and miserable. She saw now, at one blow, sundry castles in the air, which she unconsciously had built of late, faded and crumbled away ; and she bitterly regretted the past, cheered though she was by the hope of being wiser and better in the future. We shall leave her to get well and strong under her sister's care, and see how the cottage of Kin-Rhynie and its inmates prosper.

CHAPTER XVI.

CAPTAIN ANGUS had left Dunerdie, with a promise from Allister to spend a week in Edinburgh on his return from Ayrshire, he never having seen the capital ; and as Angus's regiment would then be at the Castle, he engaged to show all the lions to his Highland crony.

Allister of late had more than once found fault with Jessie's dress, which was too simple, he said ; he also remonstrated with her because she would not curl her hair like the smart English housekeeper at the Laird's ; and when Jessie smilingly answered that these were newfangled nonsenses which the Captain had put into his head, he would frown and look vexed. He found the change very unpleasant when Angus left Dunerdie, for it takes some time to regain industrious and orderly habits of work after a life of

amusement and comparative idleness. He was bored even by the hardworking activity of his sweetheart, particularly if in conversation she alluded in any way to Captain Angus; and it was with some feeling of relief that he welcomed an order from the Laird to start for Ayrshire, about a fortnight after the date of Jessie's visit to Bell M'Pherson.

He proceeded to take leave of Jessie that very evening, and as he walked up the glen he caught himself wishing he were not an engaged man, going to settle down at Birken Brae in the course of summer; but when he lifted the latch of the door, he remembered Jessie's bright eyes and all her love and devotion—and, in short, was as vacillating as a vane on a house-top. Not so Jessie, who welcomed him as affectionately as heart could wish, and down whose cheeks the tears rolled when he showed her the Laird's letter.

"It's silly to grieve when I'm proud to see the trust the Laird puts in you," said Jessie, as Allister seated himself by her side on the settle.

“ But oh ! I’m loth to part wi’ you, my ain dear Allister ! Weary the time will seem to me wanting you in Dunerdie ; mony a dark nicht an’ eerie day will I pass. But there will aye be the pleasure o’ seein’ the house biggin’, an’ whiles ye’ll hae time to write us a letter, will ye no ? ” And Jessie looked very beseechingly at Allister, the result of which proceeding was that he gave her a hearty kiss, and told her not to be silly an’ greet, but to keep a blithe heart whatever way things went. Write ! of course, when he had time, he would do so ; but when a man had such important business to attend to as *he* would have, she naturally must not expect to hear often. And Allister threw back his head and settled his collar as though he were the Laird himself. Had he there and then told Jessie that the Queen had made him one of her councillors, such was Jessie’s admiration of him, and belief in his perfections, that I am sure she would have thought her Majesty a most fortunate woman in having secured so faultless an adviser.

Long ere Jessie thought it time, the young man

rose and went to take leave of Mrs Cameron, who as usual sat knitting in her own snug corner.

“Fare-ye-well, Allister Stuart,” said she, holding his hand; “keep a leal heart and a straicht path, my lad; and dinna lippen ower muckle to thae high-flown Lowlanders, but mind that you’re a Highlander. Keep to your duty, and trust i’ the Lord; an’ we’ll aye pray for your safe guidance through the temptations and vanities o’ the warld.”

Jessie’s leave-taking was very tender, and when the adored Allister had for the twentieth time said Farewell, and was actually gone, the poor lassie came back to the hearth with tearful eyes and quivering lips. She almost wished that Allister had been content to remain at Dunerdie, and give up this trip to the south, but quickly dismissed the thought as a kind of treason against her idol, and resolved to be as blithesome and busy as usual, determining to spin with great diligence, in order to have the finest of plaids ready to present to her betrothed on his return. His return! already she thought of that, and he had not yet gone! So

Jessie went about the cottage, chatted to her mother, made plans, and had golden visions of her future home at Birken Brae. She occasionally indulged herself in a twilight walk round some of Allister's favourite haunts, especially to the hill-side, whence, seated under the larch-trees which waved their light branches on its summit, she could see the rising walls of the new buildings of Birken Brae.

There is always a pleasure in retracing, step by step, a walk taken with some one very dear and now gone ; each turn recalls some word or look, each resting-place some cherished recollection. Jessie used to take great delight in thus revisiting each well-remembered spot, and thought of little but Allister night and day.

Bell came to see her sometimes, but she still was staying with Katie, and seemed to put off returning to Dunerdie as long as possible.

So my heroine lived on quietly, the great event in her existence being the receipt of a letter from Allister, announcing his safe arrival in Ayrshire,

and stating that he was to board at the grieve's house ; which was all very grand news to the simple Jessie, more especially as the letter informed her that Mr Dewar went in his own dog-cart to fetch Allister from Kilwinning station, and mentioned, besides, sundry other occurrences, which were to her proofs of the consideration with which her lover was treated.

CHAPTER XVII.

ALLISTER STUART had been strongly recommended to the care of Sir John Cunninghame, the management of whose estates and farms he had been sent to study, and Sir John had given strict orders to his grieve Dewar to take every care of the young Highlander during his stay. Very trim and neat was everything about the farm, with its comfortable house and well-kept garden ; and most imposing to the Highlander was the close array of stacks of corn standing behind the farm-buildings. Allister was quite astonished at all he saw ; and Mr Dewar's pretty parlour, with its hair-cloth sofa and arm-chairs, its carpet and gay chintz curtains, appeared to him superior to anything he had previously imagined, and to be a farmer of this sort really seemed next thing to being the laird himself.

When called down to supper, Allister was introduced to the family, consisting of three or four sturdy boys and girls ; their mother, a stout canny-looking woman ; and last, not least, the eldest daughter, an only child by a former marriage.

Miss Christina Dewar was a very smart young lady, who had been educated at Miss M'Kissock's boarding-school in Ayr. She had a quantity of fair ringlets, a pink-and-white face, a stylish sort of figure, and dressed, to the best of her ability, according to the fashions in the *Illustrated London News*.

To Allister she seemed tremendously grand, as he sat silently listening to her fluent conversation with her father and brothers, and admiring the wonderful crochet-work which she seemed to construct with such marvellous dexterity.

He was astonished next morning at seeing this dainty damsel actually busy in the dairy, and giving her orders to the stolid-looking dairy-maid with exactitude and clearness. Mr Dewar made a point of having this duty strictly attended to ; but

as soon as it was over, Miss Christina gladly escaped to her room and to her toilette, and also to a stray novel, if she could find one.

She was a kind-hearted good-natured girl, but spoilt by her love of finery, and perhaps by the knowledge that she had a pretty little sum of three hundred pounds of her own in the Ayr Bank, which had come to her from her mother.

The last book she had read or re-read happened to have been *Waverley*, and her head so ran on Glennaquoich and kilts, Gaelic and mountain scenery, that she actually dreamed of turning into Flora M'Ivor herself ; and when Allister appeared on Sabbath morning in his handsome Highland dress, adorned with all the finery which Angus had given him, she felt considerably elated at the thoughts of being attended to kirk by so gallant-looking an escort. To say the truth, the young man had felt mortified at the total neglect with which she had treated him, and the change which now came over her manner was more soothing to his vanity than he was disposed to admit.

From this day forth Miss Christina was perpetually asking questions about the Highlands ; and Allister would often sit of an evening describing the life they led in Dunerdie, and recounting all the legends and tales which his knowledge of Celtic lore, or perhaps his imagination, could muster.

At first he mentally compared Christina with Jessie, and gave decided preference to the latter ; but the Lowland belle had many advantages over the simple Highland maiden which were peculiarly likely to dazzle one of Allister's disposition. He occupied himself with hard work, all day attending Dewar about the new works, reading treatises on reclaiming and draining ; after which bodily and mental labour, the fair Christina's society in the evening seemed to him most delightful. When he had been with the Dewars about a month, he received the following letter from Jessie :—

“DEAR ALLISTER,—We are all most happy to get word of your welldoing ; and I must even write you these few lines to say how brawly the walls of

Birken Brae begin to rise. From our old seat on the knowe it can be plainly seen, and I hear the land is most wonderful fine all round it. It seems a weary while since ye left us, dear Allister ; but I am counting the days, and next Wednesday ye will have been gone half the time, if ye return on the twentieth day of April, as ye said. Praises be to God, my mother is no more frail than she was ; and we are getting news of Donald's safe coming to land from the Robisons. This has been a great joy and a blessing to us all. Johnnie is doing weel, and has a hantle more work than he can do ; but living is awful dear in those parts, he says."

Here followed a little country news, and Jessie's epistle ended with these words:—

"For though ye be from us, ye are aye in our hearts and in our thoughts ; and so no more at present from your own

" JESSIE CAMERON.

"P.S.—Ye must overlook mistakes. I am blithe to hear that the folk treat ye so civilly. Be sure to speak a good word about bonnie Dunerdie."

Allister did not answer Jessie's letter for a long time, and even then his reply might have been called most unsatisfactory, and very cold for a love-letter. To Jessie, however, any word of his was a treasure ; and if the precious epistle was short and dry, he had a great deal to do, and could ill spare time to write. She heard no more for a long time, for Allister fell ill from over-exertion and violent cold, and was kept in bed for some days by a sharp fever. Now it was that the better points of Christina's character shone forth ; a kinder nurse never yet waited on an invalid. Poor girl ! unconsciously to herself she was beginning to take a very tender interest in the handsome Highlander, and his illness brought them more together every day. As soon as he could crawl down stairs into the parlour, she devoted herself to him, giving up every gaiety and inducement to leave home for the purpose of nursing him ; so that her stepmother laughingly asserted that the somewhat indolent Christina was *now*, for some cause or another, the busiest person in the house.

Poor Jessie ! had you known all this, you would not have gone on spinning your fine plaid so cheerily. But even you began to be fidgety when weeks slipped past and brought no word from Allister !

Yet she did not like to go and inquire for him at his brother's, lest she should thereby show that he had not written to her. Her mother and she were much alarmed when Bell M'Pherson brought the news of his illness ; at length a few lines arrived from himself, in answer to an agonised entreaty from Jessie, in which he begged her to keep her mind easy, that he was quite recovering, his kind friends letting him want for nothing ; he was not able to return home yet, but he gave Jessie some instructions to look after various points in the domestic economy of the new building at Birken Brae.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE cold blasts of winter had now given way to warm sunshine and soft breezes ; and Widow Cameron could venture out among her neighbours, and busy herself in those small kindnesses which form the charities of the poor. One day, however, while on some friendly errand, she was caught in sudden and violent rain, and she came home complaining that the wet and chill had "struck into her banes."

Before next morning she was seriously ill, and her daughter's whole time was occupied in nursing and tending her. And what was Allister doing ? He had gone to pass a week in Edinburgh, and by a strange coincidence Miss Christina had also gone to visit an aunt, a well-to-do widow who kept a shop in the Old Town. Angus Gordon, according to his promise, took Allister to see all the sights of

the romantic metropolis ; and he, not without a certain appearance of awkwardness, asked leave to bring "his friends" to hear the band play in the barrack square of the Castle.

When the old aunt and the pretty niece appeared, Angus looked knowingly at Allister, and drawing him aside, whispered that there *was* a good-looking lass, and he praised his taste and wished him joy of his luck. I need scarcely say how charmed Christina was with all the notice and admiration she received, nor how Allister rose in her estimation as the friend of so gay and gallant a gentleman. When they returned into Ayrshire, Allister fancied he saw a significant smile and look on the face of everybody that spoke to them ; and Christina's brothers were frequently jeering her about the Highlands, and asking how her Gaelic got on. On his table he found a hasty note from Jessie, not very elegant, perhaps, in respect of penmanship, written in the first alarm about her mother's illness, and complaining of his neglect of her last letter. He sat down and tried to think. *Here* was Christina, with

her numerous attractions chaining him to her side ; *there* was his own betrothed calling him to her. The first certainly would have been a more fitting match, the second was too homely and rustic, and would be a clog on his ambitious and aspiring dreams. What a fool he was to have engaged himself ! But could he break his word and troth-plight ? No ; he must bear it, and return to the obscurity of Dunerdie. True, she loved him dearly ; but they had been friends from their school-days, and when he asked her, he did not know what love was.

He was wretched, but with an effort resolved to be true to his word, and to leave Ayrshire and Christina. However, there were still things to be done which must keep him a week or so longer, and he determined to avoid temptation as much as possible. The consequence was, that poor Christina thought she had offended him, and was proportionately miserable. Next day he told her father of his intention of leaving them, and Christina burst into tears. Dewar looked grave, and Mrs Dewar sympathising, Allister himself half pleased

and half sorry. The result was, that the young lady kept her room to hide her red eyes, and considered herself an ill-used victim.

In the midst of so much darkness, however, a bright thought darted into her head. She was sure that Allister really liked her, but she knew he was not rich ; and perhaps it was the thought of her superiority in respect of money which prevented his aspiring to her fair hand. So recalling all possible precedents which her novel-reading experience suggested, she sent for her father, with whom she had a long interview, in which she vowed she would sacrifice her whole fortune rather than let it stand in her way, and concluded by assuring her parent that her only alternative was to marry her adored Allister, or die of a broken heart. Although Mr Dewar had a shrewd suspicion that Christina would survive any such disappointment, he assented to her wishes, for he was desirous of securing the young man for his son-in-law, being much taken with his intelligence and quickness. And besides, he had a strong impression that the matrimonial

scheme found favour in the eyes of Mrs Dewar, who wanted to get her step-daughter married and the parlour to herself. He therefore had an interview with "Mr Stuart," and told him that his behaviour had impressed them all with the idea that he was fond of Christina, and broadly hinted that he might with every prospect of acceptance venture to ask her hand; that he could also depend on having the approbation of her family and friends; and that her tidy little fortune, to which he should add another hundred, need not be any impediment.

Allister turned alternately red and pale, hot and cold. All his feelings were at war: he was dazzled at the thoughts of such an union, perplexed what to say, charmed at the thoughts of Christina, and wretched at the idea of Jessie. Seeing Dewar look amazed at his silence, he at length stammered out that such a marriage would be his fondest desire, but that he had some sort of engagement in his own country: he thought, however, that the girl in reality did not care for him, and he meant to get free.

Oh, Allister ! how could you utter that falsehood, knowing as you did how that devoted heart beat for none save you ?

Dewar looked serious, and said that he could not allow his daughter to be trifled with—that there were plenty who would be too happy to get her who had no attachments elsewhere. Visions of a farm at Birken Brae like Dewar's own, the glory of the whole district ; Christina's gentility and superiority, and the figure they would both make in the Highlands, soon conquered Allister's weak struggles of conscience, and he wrote there and then to his brother at Dunerdie to break off his engagement with Jessie Cameron, as he could not fulfil it ; and he also wrote to Captain Angus, who approved of what he had done.

He ended that day as the affianced husband of Christina Dewar, whose happiness and romantic delight knew no bounds. And now we shall leave the faithless and cruel Allister, and return to the affectionate girl upon whom so heavy a blow was about to fall.

The widow still was very unwell—so much so, that Jessie had called in the doctor, who looked grave, spoke of a long-protracted illness, and enjoined strictly upon the anxious daughter the necessity of avoiding all exciting or agitating topics. In her mother's present condition, any exertion of mind or body would have a pernicious effect, and he would not hear of summoning John home, assuring Jessie that there was no immediate danger. The weather again became bitterly cold, as happens frequently in Scotch springs, and Jessie found it difficult to keep the cottage as warm as her mother wished. The old woman did little else than sit over the fire and read her Bible, and would rarely allow her daughter to leave her sight. Anxiety and constant care for her mother had of late given Jessie little leisure for thinking of Allister. Sometimes a stray uneasy thought that he wrote but rarely would enter her mind ; but so completely was she devoted to him, and so great was her reliance on his truth and affection, that no shadow of distrust crossed her heart.

CHAPTER XIX.

It was a dark cold day, with scuds of rain-cloud driving over the melancholy grey sky; the wind whistled over the hills and moaned through the still leafless trees. The widow was dozing in her easy-chair, and her daughter sat gazing vacantly on the gloomy landscape without, when a neighbour of the name of Annie Grant, a poor industrious widow, and a great protégé of the Kin-Rhynie family, came softly in and whispered to her to "gang her way wast the house, an' she'd find one wanting her, an' she wad sit wi' the gudewife meantime." Jessie looked eagerly at old Annie's face, to try what she could glean from its expression, and a vague feeling almost of terror ran through her. Was it some news to hear? or could it be (delightful thought!) that Allister had come home to surprise

her thus ! With rising colour, her eyes sparkling and heart beating violently, she ran out to the appointed spot, and saw, not Allister, but his elder brother, the Laird's grieve, dismounted from his pony, and standing with a grave troubled countenance. Although at first he had not approved of Jessie as Allister's wife, thinking he might have chosen a richer bride than a cotter's daughter, the excellent character of the Camerons, and the young woman's well-known activity and industry, had removed all his prejudice ; and now the worthy man would far sooner have had any other task thrust on him than to have come on his present errand.

" Oh ! Maister Stuart," said Jessie, with clasped hands, " is onything wrang wi' Allister ? I'm sure there maun be when you look so serious. Is he ill —deen'—maybe dead—oh ! will ye no speak ?" she almost screamed as she looked imploringly in his face. Stuart shook his head still more gravely as he replied—

" No, my dear, he's well and hearty, I assure you."

“ Thank the Lord’s mercy for that,” said Jessie ; and added, smiling through her tears, “ but ye gied me a sair fricht for a’ that.”

“ I wish it were the warst I had to gie you, my puir bairn, this nicht ; but, Jess, it’s no my faut if I’m the bearer o’ bad tidings. Allister’s treated ye shamefully, an’ ye maun e’en try an’ forget him.”

“ Forget him—my ain Allister ! I wad sooner dee. How daur ye say sic a thing ? ” said Jessie, quivering with indignation,—“ him that my heart is bound up in, that’s aye my last thocht ere I sleep, an’ my first when I wake ! ’Deed no, Mr Stuart ; an’ you think that I wad be sae fause, ye misken me sairly.”

“ But, my lassie,” said Stuart pityingly, “ did ye no mind what I said, Allister is no worthy o’ ane o’ your honest loving thochts. But if ye winna believe me, read this yoursell,” said he, as he saw her prepared to break forth again in defence of her lover. She snatched at the letter in the well-known hand, and the words seemed to burn and stamp themselves in her brain like drops of molten lead, as she hastily

read through them. Stuart stood close to her, his heart aching for her as she read—

“ MY DEAR BROTHER,—Knowing the opinion you entertained of my attachment to Jessie Cameron, I daresay this letter will astonish you. But I was headstrong and foolish when I engaged myself to marry her. She is a dear good lassie, and my friendship for her never can alter ; but it was a mistake ever to suppose myself in love with her, for I now am pretty sure I was not, and our marriage would only make us both miserable, for sooner or later she would find out we were not suited. She loves the quietness of Dunerdie, and I prefer the more genteel life in the Lowlands. I am sure she is too sensible not to agree with me ; and though, I fear, it may be a disappointment to her at first, she is too right thinking to grieve for me, when I tell you that I am for ever attached to another—of whom no more at present, save that she is Miss Christina Dewar who is to be your sister by-and-by. I shall be happier when I know you have told yon poor girl in Kin-Rhynie ; but I

am hoping she may be of the same way of thinking as myself, and then she will not grieve for what cannot be helped.—Your loving brother,

“ ALLISTER STUART.

“ P.S.—Our marriage is to be fixed for soon, as Mrs Dewar wishes it over.”

Allister had written this cruel letter probably with some help from Miss Dewar, and sent it off as soon as his wavering mind had come to a decision, and, once gone, he would gladly have altered the expressions in it—but too late.

Jessie turned as white as death, glanced once more slowly at the letter, and turning to the grieve with a wild light in her eyes, said, in a forced and unnaturally calm manner, “ God’s will be done; an’ will ye say I wish Allister may be”—“ happy,” she would have said, but it seemed to choke her; and adding, “ I canna speak about it the nicht. I’ll gang in, sir—dinna hinder me.”

With slow and measured step she turned towards home—how heartbroken ! She felt as though to let his brother know what she underwent, were

at once owning herself a weak miserable victim ; and so with a proud bearing, and a grief too deep for words, passed from his sight.

Not to her home, or her mother's presence—the sight of her would have destroyed all self-control ; she rushed up the hill-side with frantic haste, throwing herself down in the long damp heather, and pressing her burning brow on the wet moss, in the vain effort to cool its throbbing. Ever before her eyes uprose that fatal letter ; every word seemed mocking her ; and as she lay there, still and silent, she wished that she might die. How she had loved him—how worshipped him ! and had he never returned that affection—was it really but a passing fancy ? She could not even then, in all the agony of her feelings, give up the thoughts of his love, and she tried to fancy the letter a hideous dream. But then the thought of Christina, the cruel rival who had supplanted her—did she know—could she imagine—the deathblow she was giving to another confiding heart when she accepted Allister ?

“He is happy by her side—his Lowland love ;

an' I may dree my hard fate till I dee. Oh, Allister ! Allister !" and poor Jessie found relief in tears.

An hour passed, still she lay there crushed by the blow, heedless of all external objects. At last she rose, calmer and outwardly more composed, resolved to bear patiently the heavy trial with which Providence had seen fit to visit her. She knew the effect such a painful disclosure would have on her mother, and determined to ward off all such suffering by locking her sorrow in her own breast. Years of misery seemed to have passed over her as she went down to the cottage. She moved slowly, looking faint and faded, her head feeling giddy and confused ; yet she called up a smile to answer her mother's fond caress, and busied herself as usual till the night came on, and the widow had gone to bed.

Then the wretched Jessie sat by the dying embers, and thought over all her sorrow. Nor did she spare herself ; she looked her situation full in the face, and saw the extent of her misery. At length, feeling quite worn-out, she retired to pass the sleepless

hours till morning, to be haunted by thoughts of Allister, from the time when they played together as children on the braes of Dunerdie, till the present bitter, bitter moment.

She bore herself bravely, and the few who did remark the unvarying sadness of her appearance, attributed it to her anxiety and constant nursing of her sick mother. Stuart was too sorry for her, and too much ashamed of his brother, to say anything of the affair. Indeed, her conduct raised her greatly in his opinion; and he merely told Allister that he was released from his engagement, and hoped, for many reasons, that he would not return to Dunerdie for the present.

Mrs Cameron got worse, and could rarely leave her bed. One day she lay there watching Jessie, who sat by the window with her work, her sad thoughts far away. "Come here, my bairn," she called; "take the creepie, an' sit down by me as you used when you were a wee lassie. Gie me your hand, my ain darlin', an' listen to what I'm gaun to say. Ye mayna see't, but I feel mair frail every

day. Ye maunna grieve ower muckle, dear, gin I tell you that I'm deein'. Na!" she said, as Jessie convulsively seized her thin worn hand—"na! our lives are in the hand of the Lord; gin He sees fit to end the days o' my pilgrimage, wha's to say Him nay? He has shown loving-kindness an' mercy to me, an' my hope is in His grace. 'Deed, my lassie, but I'm thankfu' to be released. I'll gang to my rest in peace, for my bairns are weel provided. My darlin' Donald is far, far away. I kent, when we partit, that we never wad meet mair in this world! John is a strong man, and an upright: he can make himsell a place an' a hame. But the blessed thocht that gars me feel sae happy, is that you, my bairn, winna miss your auld mammie, for your ain hame's risin' fair by the waterside, an' Allister 'ill be mair to you than a puir auld body like me wad ever be."

"Oh mither, mither!" cried Jessie, falling on her knees by the bedside, and burying her face in the bed-clothes—"oh, dinna say it—dinna leave me! Ye'll get better when simmer comes, an' a' the bonnie

leaves an' sweet flowers come oot again ! O, mammie, dinna break my heart !"

"No, dear lassie ; I hae lookit my last on the bonnie birken-trees an' the sparklin' water o' Rhynie. But I'm gaun to the better land : we'll meet again. Dinna mourn, my dear Jessie," said the widow, tenderly smoothing the braids of hair on her sobbing child's brow. "Ye'll be a happy wife, for you'll hae God's blessing. A gude dochter hae ye been to me, an' a gude wife ye'll be to Allister. I wad hae likit to see you at your ain fireside wi' your ain braw gudeman ; but the Lord's will be dune, and I'm fain to be content that you're provided for. For, oh ! my heart wad hae ached to leave you your lane. A man may fecht through the warld, an' get on, but it's a sad, sad thing to be a mitherless lanely lassie. A weary weird wad it hae been ! sae I'm the mair thankfu' we're spared it. For I kenna a friend ye wad hae to ca' on for kindness when I'm awa frae you, my bairn ;" and the invalid fell back on her pillow, totally unconscious of the poignant sorrow her words awakened, nor of how deeply the

poor girl felt the truth of all she had said. From that time Jessie rarely left her mother's bedside ; she grudged every word or look given to another, and never was such watchful tenderness as she displayed in her attendance. But nothing availed ; after a very few more days, during which her talk was generally of Allister and Jessie's home (to which she turned the unhappy girl's thoughts, thinking it the only thing likely to cheer her), little guessing that each mention of it added a fresh drop to her child's cup of sorrow, the gentle and humble-minded widow found that rest she so coveted. Her last words were a blessing on Jessie, her last movement to lay her hand in her daughter's. The poor girl never before had felt so totally overwhelmed ; every object in life seemed gone, and herself more utterly desolate than mourner ever was before. To add to her sorrow, she heard from John that he was unable to get away from his work for a single day, and therefore could not undertake a journey to the north, where he was so much needed.

CHAPTER XX.

THE last sad duties had been paid to the poor widow ; she was followed to the grave by all the farmers and residents of Dunerdie. The grieve and M'Pherson took the direction of everything upon themselves, sparing the orphan Jessie many painful details. The greatest sympathy was felt for her ; nor were kind friends and offers of service wanting ; yet she shunned them all, and sat in her lonely darkened dwelling for days, refusing to be comforted. The gentle and warm-hearted Katie Cumming left her own house, and crossed the hill to stay a while with Jessie ; and by degrees her influence turned the mourner's thoughts to the true source of consolation. The poor girl was humble, pious, and accustomed from early youth to cling to her Bible and its precepts as to the only safe and

unerring guide ; but now she seemed plunged in such utter hopelessness, that for some time she could scarce seize the meaning of what she heard or read. Katie found her thus passively suffering when she came to Kin-Rhynie.

Mr Stuart took the deepest interest in Jessie, and after various consultations with Katie, resolved to write a plain statement of the case to John Cameron, advising him to procure change of scene for his sister.

Katie and Bell heard of Allister's conduct with sorrow and great indignation ; they both hoped Jessie might be spared the pain of remaining at Kin-Rhynie for the present.

A difficulty arose, which came from herself. In her deep grief she seemed to find her only pleasure in speaking of her mother, and in caring for each spot about the cottage which had been in any manner connected with her. John was still unable to leave the Lowlands, but he fully entered into the views of his kind friends, and in consequence, before very long, Jessie left home under the care of

a friend' of Katie's, and went to join her brother near Perth, where he had taken a small cottage for the term of his engagement to the railway works.

Sore was the struggle to our heroine as she left her home in charge of old Annie, and bitter were the tears she shed at the sight of each familiar object on her way down to the village. Few people would have recognised in the tall pale girl in deep mourning, whose heavy eyes and sad countenance told a tale of deeply-rooted grief, the blithesome, bonnie lass who had danced at Maggie's bridal scarce a year ago.

When she reached her journey's end, though the sight of her brother made her grief burst forth afresh, his affectionate care, and the promise that henceforth he would never leave her, gave Jessie the first happy moment she had known for many a long day.

The cottage was neither roomy nor new : John pointed out so many little things to be done for their comfort, that she found it necessary to rouse

herself and be of use to him, an exertion which did her the greatest good.

Bell M'Pherson had been very anxious to send some word of kindness to John, and would have done so, had not shame for her conduct towards him kept her back ; but though Jessie dwelt long on her and on Katie's kindness, he never spoke of the lassie in any way.

Birken Brae was finished, and pretty it looked, with the brawling waters at its foot. Allister and his bride had arrived, and taken possession, the fair Christina greatly delighted with the novelty of the scenery to her Lowland eyes, and still more so with the attention paid to her as a bride. Allister had heard with a keen pang of sorrow of the widow's death, and he avoided the glen and Kin-Rhynie. He knew how shamefully he had behaved, and the sight of the Highland hills, and all the well-known places, awoke thoughts of Jessie, which had Mrs Allister Stuart known, she might probably not have relished. He had given her a modified account of his former engagement ; but it jarred

upon his ear to hear Christina laugh at "the presumption of a cottar-lass like Jessie expecting to get such a genteel husband as Mr Stuart!" She was not much liked through the country, for the tide of popular feeling ran in favour of Jessie ; and Allister was spoken of as having behaved "most terribly ill" to her, round many a neighbour's hearth. The bride, too, gave herself airs (according to Dunerdie), so that altogether the Birken Brae establishment was not in favour. Allister, however, had some partisans, for he laid out money freely, intending and expecting to astonish the Laird and everybody else by the grand scale of his new works and improvements.

We must now pass over a space of several months. The harvest was again nearly ready for the sickle, whilst here and there a golden leaf began to mix with the green hue of summer. John and Jessie Cameron sat on a rough bench outside their Lowland cottage, looking at the bright clouds of sunset reflected in the broad Tay. Jessie was paler than of yore, but her pleasant face had a sweet serenity in its

expression as she listened to her brother. "Weel then, Jessie dear, I suppose we may e'en be flittin' to the north again, if you're sure that you can bear the sicht o' the auld place, forby that o' thae folk at Birken Brae ! Ye maun make up your mind, for I canna weel bide here, now the wark's dune ; an' if we gang further south, it should be settled wi' Mr Thamson at ance."

"Maister Thamson is a kind friend an' a gude man," answered Jessie ; "his offer of keepin' ye on to the warks doun south is real considerate. I ken weel there's a hantle o' folks wad tak it, but my heart is just pining for the free air o' Rhynie side. I hae nae fear, thank Heaven ! o' gaun hame. Allister Stuart is naething to me now, an' as our lots are cast in the same land, the sooner we hae met (in the new way we'll be to ane anither) the better it 'ill be."

Jessie sighed deeply, for though long since roused from her first overwhelming grief, the thought of the false love who had caused her such sorrow was very painful. His conduct had lowered him in her

eyes ; and rumours of his proceedings at Birken Brae, which had reached her, were not calculated to alter her opinion.

She had thought often and deeply of her own future lot, wisely determining not to waste her existence in vain regrets for the past ; and it was quite possible for her to make others happy, even though she was not happy herself.

Her love had been so sincere that its uprooting left a blank which nothing ever could fill. Mr Thomson, the overseer of the works, was, as she had said, both kind and good. Much interested in the Camerons, he had taken a great fancy to Jessie, and brought his children to see her : she was so gentle, and yet so ready to understand and amuse them, that she became their prime favourite. Many a happy evening did they pass at the cottage with her, whilst their father talked to John of the works, and lent him books to study on the subject. Thomson greatly wished to take the Camerons on to his other new undertaking, conse-

quently their decision of returning home caused him considerable disappointment.

This very same evening, far away in the Highlands, pretty Bell M'Pherson sat by her father's side, crying, and expostulating with him ; for the honest farmer was not well pleased with her for refusing a wealthy young farmer who had hoped to win the Rose of Dunerdie. Nor was this the first offer she had refused.

"The lassie's gane wud," quoth the old man. "I said naething when she wadna tak Hunter o' the Dell, an' M'Intosh of Drumnaglass (though she micht hae gane farther an' fared waur, for the lan's were gude, an' the purses weel filled). I didna see there was muckle ill in the tane bein' a wee bit deaf, an' the ither a widower. Eh me ! but lasses are siccan gowks ! Now, here we hae young Forbes, wi' as fine a herd o' coos as ever I saw, an' a gude mailin an' bonnie house ; no to speak o' his bein' a gay young lad, as jaunty as a sodjer. An' it's still 'Na, na, I'm obleeged to ye.' Hoots, lass, ye maun be glamoured, I'm thinkin'."

“Eh, father, are ye sae keen to get quit o’ me the day? I’m sure ye’re very unkind to wish me awa! An’ as to your gay lad, he has a head like a carrot, an’ he’s a wee stumpit feckless-like mannie. Gin I canna get better than him, I’d best bide as I am.”

Hereupon the father stormed, and the daughter coaxed, cried, and as usual ended by getting her own way.

The truth was, her father conceded a good deal to her for the sake of the comfort she was to him. Aunt Eppy was gone back to her own home, and, freed from her foolish flattery, Bell had become a different creature.

Though a trifle less wild than formerly, still her clear merry laugh cheered the chimney-corner, and the industrious care she bestowed on all her household duties, caused the M’Pherson butter and cheese to be sought by all purchasers, as excelling in quantity and quality.

Very rarely now would Bell leave home to attend merrymakings, and obstinately did she refuse all acquaintance with Allister’s wife, even when their

fine house-warming was the talk of the neighbourhood for a week before, and a week after it took place. Allister knew that Bell would never forgive his behaviour to her friend Jessie, and therefore took care not to find himself in her company, as the little damsel was in the habit of speaking her mind pretty freely.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE Camerons came back to Kin-Rhynie.

Who amongst us does not know the wretchedness of a first return home after the loss of a cherished and beloved one—the sad vacuity that is felt in seeing the empty place, and missing at each moment the well-remembered form? The rich, perhaps, who are able to alter the arrangement of their dwellings, may be less liable to this most painful feeling, though even a palace is not exempt from its intrusion; but the humbler classes, who of necessity must live on in the same rooms, and see the same familiar pieces of furniture, all reminding them of the lost one, are more particularly exposed to this bitter sorrow. When our friends got to Kin-Rhynie late in the afternoon, through the provident care of old Annie, they found everything ready for them.

The cottage was clean and neat, and everything in it showed that no neglect had been allowed in the owner's absence. The good woman was delighted to receive them, and they both behaved in a calm and composed manner, though each could see that more was felt than the other cared to show.

It was not till the brother and sister found themselves alone, side by side on the old settle, that Jessie caught sight of her mother's precious red plaid, which had been by chance laid on the bed during Annie's preparations.

The sight of it, where she had so often wrapped it round her dear lost mother, quite upset her ; and leaning her head on John's shoulder, the tears rolled down her cheeks. He too gave way. After a few moments of silent grief, he said to his sister, " Ay, Jessie dear, she's taen awa frae a warld o' sin an' sorrow, an' we maun pray to meet her again in the bricht an' bonnie land whaur angels spread their snawy wings. We maunna be sae selfish as to wish her back, though fain, fain would I see her dear face an' hear her kind voice ance mair. I'll do my pairt to

make life pleasant to ye, an' we'll be everything to ane anither."

"Ye say true, Johnnie," was Jessie's reply; "but when I look round the room, there's no a thing in't that doesna mind me o' her! I wadna like it to be onything else; the mair I think o' her, an' her gude-ness an' love to us, the better will I be. And when I hae a kind brither like yoursell to speak wi', I may haud mysell to be ower lucky."

It was not long before Bell came to see Jessie,—timidly, it is true, at first, because she felt that her behaviour to John must, if known to her, have prejudiced his sister against her; but the pleasure which was shown at sight of her, banished that fear from her mind. Voluntarily Jessie led her to speak of the Stuarts, though she could not suppress a sigh when Bell told of Allister's great works at Birken Brae; yet she hastily stopped her informant when she commenced speaking disparagingly of him, and saying how indignant folks were at his treatment of his old love.

"Gin ye loe me," exclaimed she, "ne'er say yon

again. I canna hear Allister ill spoken of ; though he was a sair grief to me, I hae nae wish to mind it noo, an' I wad be his friend for a'."

"Jessie, ye're ower gude a Christian, if I daur say sae," said Bell ; "he behaved to you shamefully ; an' sinfu' though ye may haud it to be, I'm real glad he has a sair bargain o' his Lowland lady."

"What do ye mean, lass ?—are they no happy ?"

"Ou ! I dinna say that ; they're no that amiss ; but she's aye saying the Highlands are ower cauld and ower wild for her. She sits wi' her shoon maist in the fire, happed up in shawls an' plaids. Allister has to nurse her like a pet lamb."

"Oh, Bell !" said Jessie, "you canna tak pleasure in a fellow-creature's fa'in' into ill-health ; I dinna like to hear you say that."

"Weel, weel, maybe it's wrang ; but for a' that, Allister's a very different man frae your blithe auld joe, that gaed about aye singin' and aye cheerie ; but ye'll see't yoursell, I ken fu' weel."

John Cameron had in nowise forgotten Bell,

but had schooled himself into a perfect state of indifference ; at least, so he fondly thought. He felt pleased to hear such praise of her from all her neighbours : she was, indeed, now well spoken of in the whole strath ; but he had told Jessie that he thought such good behaviour would not last very long.

Jessie had found out ere now that there had been some dire grievance between these two, but never imagined how deeply her brother had loved, nor how his true affection had been received.

Often as they met, he seldom spoke to Bell unless it was unavoidable. Too late she had discovered how infinitely superior she thought him to all her other admirers ; but she determined to be as reserved and distant to him as he seemed resolved to be towards her.

Jessie passed a few days at Kin-Rhynie, tormented with a wish to see Allister, and judge for herself of his happiness. Early one morning she stole down to the spot from whence his home was visible. In spite of herself, the first view of

the neat farm-house, with its extensive out-buildings and trimly-planted garden, gave her one sharp pang of regret, as she thought of who should have been the rightful mistress there. It certainly was a sweet spot, occupying the slightly-raised plateau of cultivated land by the rolling river. A rapid and sparkling burn dashed down the brae at one side of the farm-garden, whilst from the house there was a lovely view of the junction of Rhynie and the river, which united nearly opposite. Jessie gazed long and intently, trying to still the reminiscences evoked by the sight. She watched the servants moving about, and cattle being driven out to graze ; soon a smart dog-cart rattled up to the door, into which got Allister himself, and drove rapidly away.

Fain as she would have lingered, she was afraid of being missed at home, and quickly returned, pondering on her fate, and thinking of Allister with a strong desire to know if he really was happy.

He, on his side, heard that the Camerons had

come home, and dreaded meeting them ; long ago he had to himself acknowledged the cruelty of his behaviour to Jessie ; and when Christina was ill or fretful, his eyes would turn towards the Kin-Rhynie hills with a sigh of regret.

On the Sabbath following their arrival, the Camerons, among the rest of the good folks of Dunerdie, took their way to the old kirk. It was a quiet peaceful day, with the usual silence and repose of a country Sabbath, and with serious and devout looks John and Jessie took their own accustomed seat. Many an eye among the congregation turned to the smart cloth-lined seat and fine gilt Bibles which distinguished the Birken Brae pew. The Stuarts came in late, Christina dressed in a gay fashionable silk gown and cloak, with a ridiculous little bonnet, from under which streamed out her long flaxen curls. Allister had adorned himself with a regular fine cloth suit and shining beaver-hat, much less suited to him than the homespun clothes and jaunty Highland bonnet of old times.

The psalm was singing, and after a few minutes

his attention seemed riveted by a well-known voice, whose clear notes were distinct even amidst the not very gentle tones of a Highland congregation.

Allister dared not look that way ; he knew Jessie Cameron was but a few paces from him, and that there must be many eyes watching ; nor was it till all had seated themselves for the sermon that he contrived to steal a furtive glance at his old love.

There sat Jessie, handsomer than ever, for her beauty was softened and refined. Her eyes were fixed on the minister, and no thought of earth was in her mind. Her black dress was neat and simple, and her whole appearance was that of a superior person. Allister caught sight of his own wife's rainbow flounces, and sighed. So many old friends claimed a word on the return from kirk, that the Camerons were long in reaching their glen path, so that Allister had plenty of time to watch them whilst he waited for his dog-cart, and saw Jessie walk away with her brother, welcomed by all, whilst *he* dared not speak to her ! From that day

he was always seeking a glimpse of her, and his regrets for the past hourly increased.

John Cameron's reputation for cleverness and expertness in his trade was such, that the Laird at once secured him for some works he contemplated, and also gave him the superintendence of some valuable quarries which had lately been opened on the estate. These occupations, along with looking after the crofts and little farm at home, kept him busy enough ; while Jessie did her share of farm and domestic work, and visited and assisted her poorer neighbours, till her name was blest both by young and old.

Not many weeks after her home-coming she was thrown into consternation by a letter from Mr Thomson, begging leave to visit Kin-Rhynie with one of his children, who had been ordered Highland air after an illness. John felt quite flattered, for Mr Thomson was wealthy, and might have taken, had he chosen to do so, the most expensive house in the neighbourhood. Jessie's housewifely fears led her to dread that his finding things so different

from what he had been used to, would disappoint him with his accommodation at Kin-Rhynie ; but when he came, he seemed quite as content as if he had dwelt in a cottage all his life ; and little Charlie's delight at the total change of scene was unbounded.

It was soon bruited about that there was "a grand visitor at Kin-Rhynie !" The Laird took the trouble to send for him, in order to show him various recently-executed or projected improvements on his estate. Nay, he consulted Mr Thomson about them, and was heard to praise him as a clever intelligent man.

When it was discovered by the inquisitive that he was a widower, people soon determined that Jessie had got a new sweetheart worth two of Allister ; and not a few of them took a malicious pleasure in spreading the report until it reached Allister's ears. He hated the idea of being forgotten, though he knew that Jessie and her concerns were as widely parted from him as pole from pole.

She was in her garden one sunny afternoon, training her favourite honeysuckle over the cottage, when a shadow darkened the path, and she turned hastily to see Allister gazing at her as though his soul were in his eyes, but irresolute whether he should address her.

She became deadly pale, and caught at the window-sill for support ; but in a few seconds recovered herself, and said calmly, " Are ye wantin' my brither, Maister Stuart ? "

" *Mr* Stuart ! Oh, Jessie, if ye've ony mercy, do not call me that, an' do not look sae cauldly, if ye would hae me keep my reason ! "

Jessie drew up her tall figure to its full height as she replied : " What ye mean by that way of speakin', I dinna ken. Ance mair, sir, what's your wull ? Can I be of ony service to you ? If no, I see nae need ye hae to bide here. "

" Jessie, Jessie ! I have focht and warstled against it for nichts an' days, but a' to nae purpose. I maun tell you, I'm a miserable man that has destroyed his ain happiness. I wad fain have your

pardon and your pity ; but oh, lassie ! dinna look sae stern and cauld at me."

Jessie shuddered as she said, " My pardon ye hae had langsyne, an' my prayers for your happiness ana ; and noo ye'll be best awa hame, for I've nae wish to haud converse wi' ye."

" Oh, but ye're hard an' cruel, Jessie ! I see now, ye never loved me, or ye wadna use me that gate —me that never ceases regrettin' and lamentin' ; me that you are aye dearer to than ony. When I see my house, and the taupie I hae, for my punishment, brocht to be its mistress, it is you my thochts flee to. And oh ! to see you as you are, and to feel it's a' my ain doing." Allister spoke hurriedly, and seized Jessie's cold hand imploringly, but she wrenched it from him, and answered indignantly—

" Love ye, Allister ! God abune us a' kens how truly I did love ye. I wad hae starved wi' you, an' ca'd it happiness ; an' what reward gat I, but ill requital an' cruel neglect ? Thankfu' am I that ye *are* naething to me noo. When ye daur to speak o' love to me, an' you the husband o' anither, I

despise ye ! Gang your ways hame, an' dinna ye come here again, or I'll steek the door against your insults. The Allister I loved is as different to you as the sunshine is to the mirk nicht ;" and Jessie pushed by him and ran into the cottage, where her outraged feelings and strong womanly indignation found vent in a flood of bitter tears.

After this painful scene, she felt more ruffled in temper and broken in spirit than she had been for a long time. She remained in the house disturbed and thoughtful the rest of the day ; nor was her state of mind greatly improved by Mr Thomson, who came in to seek her, and who took the opportunity, honestly and simply, to ask her if she would marry him, and be a mother to his children ; assuring her that his affection for her had commenced long ago, and was founded on respect and esteem.

He spoke with feeling and kindness ; poor Jessie's tears flowed afresh, but finally she took courage, and told him her whole story, confessing sorrowfully, that although Allister had proved so unworthy, his image was still too deeply rooted in her heart

to love another. She prayed her new suitor to forgive her refusal, and to continue to be her kind friend as heretofore. Thomson was disappointed; he really was attached to Jessie, and besides had such a high opinion of her, and regard for John, that he had quite set his heart on this union; but he listened to her quietly, touched by her distress, and promised not only never again to allude to the subject, but at all times to be ready to give her a friend's aid, should she require it.

John was exceedingly sorry to hear of Jessie's decision, though too well aware of her conscientious motives to argue with her about her determination. There seemed such advantages in the proposed marriage that he would gladly have seen it take place, and so he frankly told the refused lover. But Jessie was firm, and the Thomsons took their leave in a day more, little Charlie miserable at parting with his dear Jessie, and his father sadly low-spirited at his unsuccessful wooing. Bell M'Pherson was very indignant that any one should think that a grey-headed widower *could* have been a fit hus-

band for Jessie ; but as the news somehow or another spread abroad, other folks thought Jessie mad to refuse so great an alliance.

Jessie soon contrived to make her brother sensible how much happier they were remaining together, and the long cold winter months slipped by with no farther molestation about the Thomson affair.

Early in spring, Mrs Allister Stuart presented her husband with a daughter, after whose birth she became more sickly than ever. Meantime, however, the new farm got on well ; and yet, in spite of his apparent worldly prosperity, the master of Birken Brae looked sad and melancholy.

John Cameron, busy with his multifarious occupations, often caught himself looking at Bell, and wondering why she would not marry one of her train of admirers. Whenever he did catch his thoughts wandering in that direction, he assumed an aspect of cool neglect towards her, which often secretly caused tears of regret and mortification to stand in her pretty blue eyes.

CHAPTER XXII.

IT is now March. Deep snow has been succeeded by a rapid thaw, which has flooded all the waters, and made the country perfectly spongy ; and it now pours as though the rain would never cease.

John and Jessie are at home listening to the heavy splashing and pattering of the incessant rain without ; the former shakes his head, foretelling “a real heavy spate.”

“Surely, Johnnie,” remarks Jessie, raising her eyes from her work—“surely there’s mair than common noise doun the glen. I’d fain win out and see what’s gaun on.” They stand at the cottage-door and strain their ears ; a roar and rush of many waters certainly strikes them ; but, after all, winter floods are common enough in the north country ; so they do not think it worth while to go out and get

drenched, and return to their snug fireside. Still without the storm rages and the rain falls heavily. It happened that at this time there was a late moon ; and Jessie, unable to rest, and possessed with an indefinable dread of something wrong, rose softly about five o'clock ; and finding the storm abating, threw a plaid around her, and walked down to see the Rhynie. What a sight met her eyes in the dim light ! The deep glen seemed actually full of water rushing along, whilst large stones were rolled down by the force of the current with a noise like rumbling thunder. Jessie stood a while trying to make out the height to which the flood had risen, when suddenly the unexpected sound of a gun-shot struck her ear.

At this early hour it seemed so strange, that for a few minutes she fancied herself mistaken. But the shot was repeated ; and although nearly drowned by the roaring water, it was quite distinct ; and this time there was no mistake. Surely these shots came from Birken Brae ! In an instant Jessie remembered the situation of the house, with water on three sides. True, it was high above the ordinary

level of the banks, and there could scarcely be any danger ; yet this flood seemed something more than common. She ran down to the point which commanded the best view of the farm ; it was not possible to see distinctly, but the whole strath appeared a sea, and the noise and dash of the flood seemed to increase momentarily. She hastened home to rouse John ; and by the time that dawn faintly broke, they were both down on the point, endeavouring to ascertain the actual condition of Birken Brae.

The house was entirely surrounded by water. Birken Brae Burn had broken its bulwark and come sweeping down behind, destroying the fields, and rushing down with terrible velocity upon the farm-buildings. The plateau upon which the house stood was flooded by the great river ; and as the Rhynie's current dashed in almost at right angles to the burn, the walls had to stand the brunt of a fearful assault. What a frightful scene that valley of roaring angry waters presented ! Large trees, torn up by the roots, whirled round in the eddies ; corn-stacks,

hay-ricks, peats—all were to be seen washing down the torrent. More than one piece of furniture and spar of wood told of bothies destroyed, and perhaps of lives lost, in the strath above.

They looked anxiously at the farm-house. The embankment at one end of the meadows was strong and well built, but if it gave way, the destruction of the dwelling-house seemed to be inevitable. Other neighbours had joined them, but all shook their heads sadly as they pointed to the rapidly increasing flood.

“Whatever Allister may do, I canna guess,” said old Peter Gordon ; “the twa farm lads are awa for some sheep he’s bocht ; sæ he’s there his lane, wi’ his wife, her bairn, an’ the servant lass.”

“Preserve us a’ !” said another ; “see to the under windows ; they’re half hid in the water already.”

“The new wa’s ’ill never stand it,” exclaimed a third. “I’m thinkin’ Maister Stuart wad gie something for half-a-dizzen yards o’ dry grun’ the morn.”

“’Od ! but this spate beats the ‘29’ a’ to nae-

thing," said a fourth. But now Jessie broke forth distractedly—

"Gude God, neighbours ! will ye let fellow-creatures droon afore your very een, an' do nae-thing to help them ? Oh, gin I had a boat, I wad try my strength, though I dee'd for't."

"A boat, a boat ! Jess, ye're richt ; we maun get a boat without losin' a minute," said John eagerly.

"There's no a boat nearer than Jock Roy's," said old Peter. "It's nae use gettin' a boat frae doun the water, for the best oars that ever pu'd stroke couldna get it up against that. The pity is, we're a' feckless auld bodies an' lasses, unless it be John Cameron there. If help's to be gotten ava, it maun be frae this side ; dinna ye see the set o' the current ?"

All this was spoken and discussed so rapidly that only a few minutes were lost. Jessie spoke again—
"Peter, an' a' you that can, gang doun to the bank, an' try to gie yon puir folk heart ;" for figures stood dimly visible at the upper windows, wringing their

hands in terror. "John, brither, you an' I'll gang as fast as we can to Jock Roy's, an' see gin naebody will help us. Tak heed, neebours ! ilk ane maun do their best this day !"

John followed his sister hastily. She seemed gifted with wings, so rapidly did she make her way to the cottage where Jock Roy kept a boat, about a mile up the river. There they found the old man and his wife busily removing such of their stock of furniture and clothing as they could lift, up a steep hillock behind their cottage, for the sea of waters surged nearer their door at every instant.

"Boat !—the Lord bless you, lass, the boat couldna weather yon wild river. Dinna ye see the trees soomin' doun at ilka minute ? The boat ! she wad be broke, an' ye'd be drooned," said Jock, staggering under the weight of a wooden box.

"For a' that, we're gaun to try," said Jessie. "Will naebody help ? For the love of Heaven, haste ye, or we'll be ower late ! Dinna ye ken Birken Brae's like to fa' in ower their heads ? There's nae savin' the Stuarts but wi' a boat. Come, John, we'll

gang our lane," said the courageous girl, advancing to the boat, where John had already placed a coil of rope, and a hook to assist in grappling.

Two others volunteered—Sandy Munro, a middle-aged man, and Francie Gow, a younger lad. With a silent prayer to God for safety, they took their places regardless of Jock's dismal forebodings.

Jessie could pull well, as most Highland women can, and she had often rowed across the river when it was considerably flooded ; but never had the most experienced of that little crew encountered such difficulties as now. The boat lay moored in a small bay. Once out of its shelter, they were dashed along by the current, till with desperate efforts they made for the opposite shore, the greatest address and caution being necessary to avoid collision with the logs and floating trees which ever and anon threatened to dash them to atoms. With long poles they strove to steer clear, but the labour and exertion they had to make in their passage down the stream were tremendous.

Allister Stuart and his wife had gone to rest in

security. When the noisy fury of the flood caused him to rise, he went out and examined his bulwarks, which appeared safe. Christina, in mortal terror, vainly implored him to get the chaise and drive her to his brother's. He knew that the road thither would be dangerous in the dark from its proximity to the river ; and though he assured her they were much better off in their own house, he regretted the chance absence of his servants, as she would not suffer him to leave her sight.

Soon a report like a cannon-shot caused most doleful shrieks from the women ; and it was with secret fears that Allister hastened down to ascertain the cause. The embankment of the upper burn had fallen in, and the long-pent-up torrent was already rushing through his fields and towards the house ! Almost simultaneously the waters overflowed the meadows in front of the house, now become, as it were, an island. At this crisis he fired his gun repeatedly, vainly hoping to obtain help. But, alas ! Birken Brae stood lonely, and he was well aware there was no boat near. No longer attempting to

hide the danger from his trembling wife, he desired her to remain up-stairs with the baby and maid, whilst he anxiously kept watch below.

As soon as dawn permitted him to see the extent of the danger, he saw likewise the little knot of figures on the opposite point of shore, by their gestures signalling that help was coming.

But now, see ! the flood has beaten against the byres, and knocked down the wall ; freed from that barrier, it rushes and eddies round his very house, penetrating the lower floor, and deepening every second. If the great bank at the head of his meadows breaks, he feels the consequence must be fatal ; and well acquainted with the river, Allister owns to himself it will be a brave fellow who guides a boat on yonder mad torrent. He takes his post at an upper window, and strains his eyes to distinguish what a speck can be which he sees rapidly descending the stream. Thank God ! it is a boat. See ! it whirls round with the current, and is borne along like a toy on the raging stream.

“They are richt !” he exclaims. He sees their

object ; it is to gain the great embankment, which still shows itself like a low dark ridge, dividing the river from the already flooded meadows. But a fierce current seizes the boat, and hurries it down below the wished-for point. They will be dashed to pieces against the stone bulwark, and never reach land ! Allister's admiration for the coolness and determination of his deliverers, for a while almost banishes from his mind his anxiety for his family and his own safety. A word of hope to the wretched Christina, and he again hurries to the window. Two figures have leapt out on the embankment ; they are pulling a rope with almost super-human energy. Now the boat itself is hoisted up, and in a minute more is launched again on the comparatively quiet waters of the flooded meadow. One man stoops, and hastily examines the masonry of the bulwark ; but Allister's eyes are riveted on another of the rowers, now bravely pulling towards him. The braided hair and uncovered head are those of a woman, and that woman, risking all to save him, is the forsaken and despised Jessie Cameron.

The boat advanced, steering for the house over what had been corn and meadow land ; the exertions they had used to guide their vessel in safety were scarcely felt by them, so anxious were they to reach the Stuarts without loss of time. Nearer the house they were again in danger from the strong current, as the waters poured round walls and between banks ; however, they made good their entry to the garden, John loudly shouting to Allister that he must make haste, as without doubt the great bulwark would not stand many minutes, and once exposed to the downward violence of the whole river, the chances in favour of the boat would indeed be small. Stuart brought down his wife and child, and the maid followed. They had to wade through the water to reach the boat, and the greatest care was necessary in arranging her, now she was so heavily laden. Christina, more dead than alive, was laid in the bottom ; and when they were prepared to start, Jessie, who spoke not one word, contrived to shelter the mother and child as

well as possible, bending down to utter soothing assurances of comfort to the poor creature, whose terror increased as they rocked with the stream. When they reached the bulwark, the men dragged the boat a long way up before they took it over into the river. Their return seemed far more full of peril than their previous voyage. Allister's fresh untired arm was of great service ; yet the feeling of being at the mercy of the wild river was frightful ; it seemed as though their strength availed naught against its force. When they reached smoother water after frantic efforts, they yet had another branch of the torrent to cross. Resting a few seconds, grappled to a huge fallen tree which had lodged on a high rock, and now cheered by the voices from the Glen Rhynie side, they again took their oars, Jessie in the place of the lad Francie, and rowing with might and main. Amidst the cheers of the party on shore they touched land !

Scarcely was their boat hauled in by a score of willing hands, when they saw the river gain the

victory over the bulwark. Breaking through it like a cataract, the turbid water madly spread over the meadows to the house, which soon appeared all but submerged.

A cry from the spectators of this disaster was interrupted by old Gordon, who, solemnly raising his bonnet, called on the rescued family to join in thanksgiving to Heaven for their preservation.

The brief but heartfelt prayer was hardly ended, when the old man, turning to Stuart, said, "And noo, next to the Almichty, gie your thanks to this lassie an' her brither, for an' it hadna been for them, few o' us wad hae daured to cross yon deeluge."

"Ay truly," said Sandy Munro, wringing the water out of his clothes. "Jessie Cameron, I'se uphaud ye for the bravest lass I ever saw or heard tell o'. She didna only tak her part at the oars wi' gude-will," said he to the others, "but did she no cheer us wi' gude words, an' keep our hearts up? Gie's a grip o' your hand, my lass ! for I'm proud to hae been alang wi' ye this day."

Christina Stuart started to her feet when she heard Jessie's name, and putting her child into Jessie's arms, exclaimed, "For this innocent baby's sake—for our ain safety and all your gudeness—bless you a thousand times, and forgie me gin I caused you sorrow. To my last hour I'll bless your name, Jessie."

Our heroine had already been sufficiently exhausted by the morning's work, and now this fresh source of agitation and excitement overpowered her. She swooned away, caught in the arms of Allister, who pushed aside all who were between them to receive her, and bent over her pale face with a look of unspeakable emotion.

John quietly removed her, and said, "Allister Stuart, yon's the lassie ye were sae cruel to, an' broke faith wi' ance. She has forgien you, an' this day has freely risked her ain precious life for your safety. Gang your ways, an' leave her to the peacefu' thocht o' the gude she has done. Sandy, gie me a help to carry Jessie hame : a' this is mair than she can thole." They carried her home, and

laying her on her bed, consigned her to the care of old Annie, under whose assiduous attention she gradually recovered.

When she awoke from her swoon, in her own home, the morning's events came back by degrees like a dream. Many and various were her emotions ; but one predominant joy was that she had been enabled to return good for evil, and had saved Allister Stuart.

Jessie of course became quite a heroine to the neighbourhood. Day after day people came to Kin-Rhynie to hear the tale of the flood from her own lips ; but the quiet modest girl shunned all allusion to her perilous voyage, and the inquisitive visitors retired disappointed of their gossip. The waters subsided in a few days, after inflicting an incalculable damage on all the farms near.

Poor Birken Brae was now a sad desert ; the arable land was little else than a beach of stones, rocks, and gravel ; the stacks of corn were gone, the farm-buildings destroyed, and the house itself uninhabitable.

Allister was nearly ruined ; he had laid out largely on all his improvements, and the lands would take years to recover the effects of this terrible calamity.

He took his wife away to the south country ; and from that day forth she never left him in peace till he took employment with her father, thus giving up the Highlands. She had a twofold reason for this, for, in addition to her terror at the remembrance of the flood, she was haunted by Jessie's pale face, and jealously tormented by Allister's unmistakable eagerness to be near her.

John Cameron's reproof to her husband had made such an impression on her, that she never rested till she had heard every particular of Jessie's story. Nor did the recital tend to restore her equanimity : she was confident that Allister's thoughts were often of the happy days of yore ; and whenever he looked serious or melancholy, as well he might under such a combination of adverse circumstances, she felt sure that Jessie Cameron was

the source of his sorrow. And truly Allister now did feel himself so unhappy in Dunerdie, that he willingly acceded to her wishes, and gave up his farm as soon as the Laird would permit.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE Camerons lived very happily and peacefully at Kin-Rhynie, their house and little farm beautifully kept, and Jessie's flower-borders really a sight to see. She had now almost totally given up the idea of any attachment between her brother and Bell. If, in any of their conversations, she mentioned her hope of seeing him take a wife, he always told her he would rather remain as he was with her.

Donald wrote prosperously and happily. He had been one of a fortunate party to the gold-fields, and had realised a considerable sum—in proof of which he sent John a hundred pounds in payment of his original debt of forty! and furthermore announced his intention of returning to Scotland at no distant period.

The Robertsons also wrote in the highest terms

of his activity and steadiness, so that Jessie had another blessing to be thankful for. Poor Donald ! how she did long to see his blithe face again !

John worked successively at many things for the Laird, but was chiefly occupied in managing the valuable quarries on the Dunerdie property.

One day, whilst Jessie was busy making oatcakes at a table near the window, kneading away most industriously, she caught sight of the grievie riding quickly up the glen. The thoughts of the memorable occasion on which he had been the messenger of Allister's desertion came into her head, and it was with a feeling of dread that she saw him hastily enter the cottage. Nor were his first words very reassuring.

"The Laird sent me here to tell you not to be frightened, Jessie ; but John has, I am sorry to say, met with an accident in the quarry, and they're bringing him home immediately."

Poor Jessie's fears directly pictured the worst to her imagination, and she implored Stuart to tell her if John was killed. "Yes, she was sure

her ain dear brother was dead. Let him tell her : she was prepared to hear it." Seeing he gained nothing by attempting to break the news, Stuart told her that, from an incautious blasting of rock, fired by an inexperienced hand, a fragment had fallen on John's arm and broken it ; and besides, he had received a cut on the head from a sharp stone. Jessie felt relieved to know that, bad as it was, he was not killed, and though sadly hurt, not in danger ; so with her usual prompt energy she set about preparing everything needful for his reception.

Before an hour was over, the men brought him on a litter, faint enough, poor fellow ! from pain and loss of blood, but still able to hold out his uninjured hand to his sister, and bid her not be alarmed. The doctor had been sent for by the Laird, who accompanied John home ; and on leaving the cottage, he desired Stuart to remain with Jessie, in case anything were wanted from the great house.

The patient was placed in his bed, and there lay

quietly awaiting the doctor's arrival to set the broken arm. Jessie and the grieve were watching by him, when a light hurried step came to the door, the latch was timidly raised, and before they well knew what to expect, Bell M'Pherson rushed up to the bedside, and fell on her knees, whilst she sobbed out, "Oh, dinna dee, dinna dee! Let me speak to you, dear Johnnie! Will ye no forgie me for a' my foolishness an' a' my giddy ways? I was strivin' against mysell a' the time when I tellt ye I didna care for ye. I cared for nane else! Miserable lassie that I am! ye're dearer to me than ony livin' creature! an' now ye're gaun to dee!" And Bell laid her head down on John's uninjured hand like a penitent child. Who can tell the joy that beamed in John's eyes as he heard this confession! though he was at the time too feeble to say a word. And who can describe the astonishment of Jessie and her companion at this most unexpected scene! The former went to Bell and tried to soothe her, whilst poor John contrived to whisper something to the weeping little

damsel, which caused her to turn and hide her tears and her pretty face together on the shoulder of Jessie, who carried her off to her own room in spite of John's entreaties to let her remain. There, the truth came out. Somebody had seen John carried home, and had told Bell that he was killed, and a sudden determination that nothing should keep her from him, that she must tell her tale and seek forgiveness, impelled her to rush instantly up to Kin-Rhynie.

When she found that John was not going to die, poor Bell's ebullition of feeling subsided, and she began to be "thinking shame" at all she had said and done; but Jessie brought such tender messages from John, even amidst all his pain, that ere long Bell was sufficiently calm to be content to sit and wait till the doctor had seen his patient.

The fracture was a simple one, easily set; the cut and injury to the head were pronounced not to be serious, but the Dunerdie Æsculapius enjoined quiet and repose.

Stuart therefore insisted on taking Bell home, and

leaving John to the judicious care of his sister. So after a farewell visit to the young man, during which Jessie and the grieve discreetly occupied themselves in minding the fire, Bell went off, looking so shy and flustered, and so perpetually blushing, that her companion, from sheer compassion, was constrained to take little notice of her when he accompanied her home to her own door.

The wonderful effect of restored happiness did John as much good as the doctor's remedies ; and the lapse of a few days found him established in the big chair, with Bell on a stool close to his feet, and Jessie going to and fro, busy with her household work, ever and anon bestowing on the lovers a kind look or complacent smile.

He now told his sister all about his former rejection, and how he had subsequently tried to forget Bell altogether ; and Bell on her part said, he ought to have discovered long ago that she loved him with her whole heart.

There was so much to discuss that Bell could

scarcely ever leave John's side, and she seemed only afraid of showing too plainly her entire devotion to him. John feared that her father would not consider him a good enough match for her; whilst the idea of leaving the farmer to live alone was somewhat of a grief to Bell herself. But the old man spontaneously came to their help, declaring that John was a lad after his own heart, and that he should live in the farm-house, and assist in managing the farm. "There's room eneuch for a'," said he, "an' I'm really obleeged to onybody that 'ill tak yon troublesome lassie off my hauns. I was e'en gettin' feared she wad fa' through amang a' her joes, an' be left to be an auld maid after a'." John declared he could not leave Jessie to keep house alone, and Bell begged very coaxingly that she would remove to the farm too. But Jessie firmly, though affectionately, refused. Kin-Rhynie was her home; there would she live and die. This plan was more readily agreed to, in consequence of a letter from Donald announcing his return, and begging Jessie

to keep house for him. So she took old Annie to live with her, and blithely entered into all the happy lovers' plans for the future.

The approaching marriage created quite a sensation in the neighbourhood ; nobody rejoiced more sincerely than Katie Cumming, whilst her bluff gudeman declared "that ither folk were content to get a wife in quiet fashion, but Johnnie gaed an' houkit his oot o' a snaw-drift."

In course of time Bell and John Cameron were married ; and such a joyous wedding never had been seen in Dunerdie. The happy faces of the principal parties concerned were enough of themselves to brighten any festivity ; and surely a bonnier bride than Bell never had been seen, nor a "mair douce an' wiselike, forby han'some man" (this was Aunt Eppy's verdict) than the bridegroom. The Laird himself honoured the wedding with his presence ; and Aunt Eppy, who had come twenty miles to attend it, danced more energetically, and snapped her fingers louder, than the youngest lass of the party. In short, there never had been such a

wedding in the strath, for the farmer spared nothing to mark his satisfaction, and the recollection of the fun and feasting was long the talk of the country.

When Jessie found herself settled alone with old Annie in Kin-Rhynie, she devoted herself yet more to the congenial task of doing good to those around her. And the lady of Dunerdie, appreciating her good sense and sterling worth, deputed to her the care and superintendence of all her charitable undertakings.

There were times when Jessie's thoughts would fly to the past, and dwell for a moment on her old dreams of happiness ; and sometimes, when she saw John and Bell in their happy home, she would experience a transient feeling of regret that her fate had deprived her of a similar lot. But she had so firm a belief that all is ordained for us, far better than our weak judgment can determine, that she never fruitlessly repined ; and no one was outwardly more cheerful, and inwardly more happy, than she.

Many sought her as a wife, yet she never mar-

R

ried. Unworthy though he had proved, her true heart clung to the memory of Allister, her early and only love; and she still recalled with a sad pleasure their first days of affection when they wandered by the bonnie banks of Rhynie.

Donald returned, a handsome manly fellow, earnest and eager in all his plans of life, and soon won the praise and esteem of all his neighbours. Possessed of a nice little fortune, he did not live very long with Jessie, for he employed his money in undertaking a good farm of the Laird's. Of course, preparatory to the farm, he took a wife—a bonnie sonsy lass, no other than Nelly Laurie, the daughter of his old enemy the gamekeeper, who took pride in his handsome son-in-law, and delighted in hearing of all his adventures in Australia.

Bonnie are the Highland hills, sweet the birken woods, and warm are the Highland hearts! If any one has taken sufficient interest in this sketch of Highland life to wish to ascertain in person its truthfulness, he will have but little difficulty in finding many worthy specimens of such characters

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